January
1927

Everybody's

Volume LVI
No. 1

CONTENTS

SERIALS

Flying Kestrel Part I — *Captain Dingle* — 12
A novel of the sea, starvation and mutiny

The Diamond Makers Part II — *Selwyn Jepson* — 145
A man, a girl, and the cleverest crooks in England

NOVELETTES

The Three Men Over the Hill — *H. Bedford-Jones* — 48
Plots and counter-plots in a sultan's palace

Ridin' Through — *W. B. Corcoran* — 82
A cowboy hero and a villainous sheriff

On the Mystery Ship — *Charles Victor Fischer* — 114
A wartime story of the sea and submarines

SHORT STORIES

Intercepted by Radio — *Ared White* — 1
A sergeant who refuses to be a hero

They's Always Thoroughbreds — *Meigs O. Frost* — 33
A racing story with a bit of sentiment

What Mars Has Joined — *A. A. Caffrey* — 41
The first cross-continent flight and its aftermath

Good to the Last Drop — *H. H. Kroll* — 75
A humorous story of back-woods folks

Nome Means "No Women" — *Charles Wesley Sanders* — 105
A cowboy who tried to avoid women

Cholera at Bukit Batu — *L. G. Blochman* — 135
A clash of purposes on a rubber plantation

Hop Wo's African Turkey — *Robert Welles Ritchie* — 169
An amusing story of a Chinaman and an ostrich

Everybody's Meeting Place — 175

PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY THE RIDGWAY COMPANY
JOSEPH A. MOORE, President — LEVIN RANK, Secy. & Treas.
SPRING AND MACDOUGAL STREETS, NEW YORK, N. Y.

Entered as Second-Class Matter, August 16, 1899, at the Post-Office, New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Additional entry at Brooklyn, New York. Yearly subscription, $2.50, in advance. Single copy, twenty-five cents. Foreign postage, $1.00 additional. No extra postage for Canada.
EVERYBODY'S takes all reasonable precautions for handling manuscripts submitted, but assumes no responsibility for their safety.
Copyright, 1926, by the Ridgway Company, in the United States and Great Britain. Entered at Stationers' Hall, London, England.

39

If you are like Jane –

Betty's soap costs five times as much as Jane's.

Can it be five times as pure—or five times as dainty? No, not one jot purer or daintier! Then why does it cost five times as much?

Well, there will always be girls, like Betty, who are casual in their choosing and lavish in their spending. Soaps with bright colors, elaborate wrappers and "expensive-sounding" names will always be made for them.

But Guest Ivory is made for girls like Jane, who are brought up to recognize and choose the fine, the exquisite, the genuine, whatever the price may be.

This dainty, smartly-turned-out feminine cake is really genuine Ivory Soap. Ivory-white, Ivory-pure, Ivory-gentle, Ivory-honest. And, with its comfortable shape, its charming blue wrapper, its smoothly-rounded edges, its rich, cleansing lather — an altogether perfect soap for the most fastidious of women.

Its cost? You can buy a trio of Guest Ivory cakes for the modest sum of fifteen cents. A single cake costs five cents. You can buy no *finer* soap for a *dollar*.

PROCTER & GAMBLE

For the face and hands
As fine as soap can be

Guest
IVORY

5¢

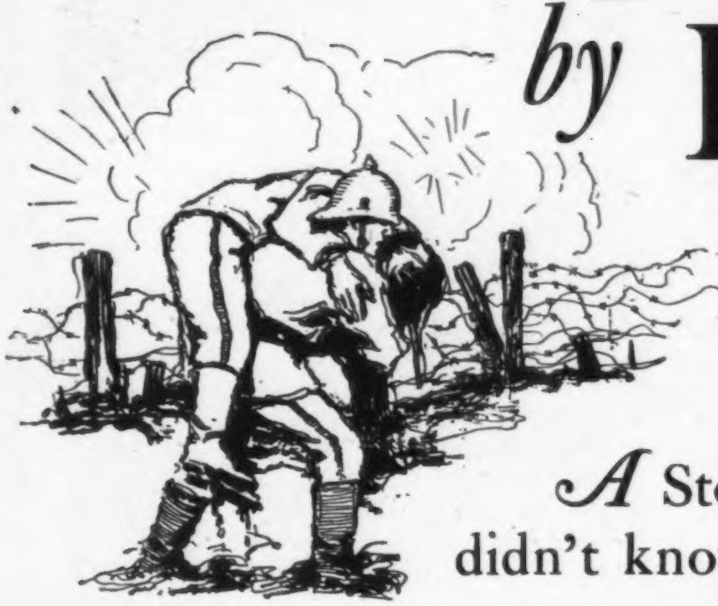
99$^{44}/_{100}$% Pure
It Floats

© 1927, P. & G. Co.

Advertising section continued in rear of book

051
EV
v. 56

Intercepted by Radio



by Ared White

A Story of a man who didn't know He was a Hero

"PRIVATE BRUNNER!" shouted the orderly at brigade headquarters in the impersonal, breezy way of a bellboy paging some inconsequential guest. "Private Brunner! Private Brunner wanted at division headquarters, *tout suite!*"

An unmilitary appearing youth, whose expression of utter demoralization was set off by an ill-fitting olive-drab uniform, slumped deeper into the improvised wooden settee just outside brigade headquarters. Although he was the only one within earshot and his name was Brunner he affected not to hear the summons. Division headquarters, or any further change of station today, had an awesome portent for him, for he had come from division headquarters only two hours before under circumstances that did not invite return.

"Better perk up, Private Brunner had!" droned the orderly, using the third person approach to indicate his disapproval of the newcomer. The orderly regarded himself as a potential first-class fighting man, temporarily at headquarters. A busted chauffeur, now about to turn mule-skinner, was not a man to command the respect of a combat soldier as such matters of caste were measured by men in the rifle ranks.

"The chief o' staff wants Private Brunner," the orderly persisted, his tones becoming slightly disagreeable. He had been dispatched for Private Brunner and he must accomplish the feat of seeing Brunner off without the humiliation of speaking to him direct. "When that guy calls people better move—move *tout suite*—and they's a side-car right over there waitin' to whiz Private Brunner to the big P. C."

Private Brunner arose reluctantly. He cast an apprehensive look at the motorcycle, pulled himself together with an effort, walked to the side-car and climbed in.

Another man might have attempted to fathom the reason for this summons. But Private Brunner clung mutely to the sides as the car bumped and bounded wildly through the mottled French countryside toward headquarters of the division in training. Whether the trip held good portent or ill was a matter that must take care of itself. Brunner long since had acknowledged defeat in his efforts to chart his course or take his bearings amid the strange whirl of circumstances that seemed to cast him hither and thither, a mere bit of helpless flotsam, on this great olive-drab sea that now was inundating France. Besides, what did it matter? Brunner had gone into the service for a particular purpose, to him an irresistible purpose. All chance of serving that purpose seemingly had disappeared before the ink had dried on his enlistment papers.

677350

HIS was not the type that ordinarily goes to war as a volunteer. He was one of those halting, shrinking, timid souls that blush and stammer in the presence of personable women, and shrink into themselves before strong-willed, outspoken men. Strange, unsuspected qualities of courage, dormant volcanoes of passion, may lie deeply hidden in such natures, but they are not dominant qualities nor easily aroused. Not quest of adventure nor strong excitement lure such men from their beaten paths at home.

It was radio that had taken young Brunner to the recruiting office in the first place. Radio had been his one hobby, one thought, one love. Brunner was one of those youthful enthusiasts whose almost fanatical devotion to the mystic realm of the wireless wave was assailing the citadels of space and blasting the foundations of a new epoch in the science of communication. On that day when the Government closed all amateur radio operations in the United States, as a war measure, Brunner found himself in much the sort of decline that young lovers know in the dark hours of blasted romance. He could neither eat nor sleep with any degree of satisfaction. So, with the news that grim old Mars had adopted the infant radio —that the Army was going to count upon the wireless for its battle communications and would spare no expense in developing the finest possible radio systems overseas—Brunner hastened to the nearest recruiting station, moved by renewed joy in life.

"Sure they want radio men!" the recruiting sergeant had assured him, enlisting him without ceremony. "They're simply walkin' the floor waiting for guys like you down at Camp Lewis!"

"Radio hell!" the receiving sergeant at camp had echoed. "What'd you enlist for if you wanted to fight by long distance? Git yourself a rifle and learn to use it! Report to Company A and they'll fix you up with a fightin' outfit."

At the end of a week Brunner had found himself paring potatoes in the company mess. A drill sergeant had taken his rifle away from him in disgust because of his persistent and unabashed inquiries when radio work would begin. Another week and the cook rebelled at having him in the kitchen.

"I think that buddy's got chilled feet—all he wants to do is try to get me to find out from the captain what he knows about the chance of a radio assignment—ain't even got backbone to brace the captain about it himself," the cook complained.

Thereafter Brunner had found himself buffeted from place to place on the wave of unpreparedness that demanded fighting men but took small cognizance, at the outset, of proper classification and use of highly skilled personnel. The men in the fighting ranks got it into their minds that Brunner was yellow and avoided him, ridiculing him mercilessly behind his back. And his captain, with a smile of serene satisfaction, got rid of Brunner on a requisition from division headquarters for a man to drive a staff officer's car. There he had stuck, being a fairly good chauffeur. And the division chief of staff having lost his own driver from the flu on the boat going over, Brunner had fallen heir to the job as a matter of course.

Earlier today he had lost that job. In fact this day, marking the end of his third month of service, had been one of the most perplexing of all the days of unhappy misadventure for Brunner. The first thing this morning he had mustered all the iron in his timid soul and gone to the abrupt and noisy first sergeant of the headquarters company with an insistent inquiry for information as to when the radio section of the division signal company was to be formed now that the —th Division was in France and getting ready for battle.

"Radio!" the sergeant had stormed. The word seemed to excite murderous instincts among the non-commissioned officers of the ranks. "Ain't you safe enough with a fine berth drivin' the colonel's own car? Say, he'll never drive you within cannon distance of the fightin'!"

"But I enlisted as a radio expert, I know radios," Brunner had persisted.

His words only brought out a disdainful snort from the first sergeant.

"Say, Brunner, we're over here to fight the Boche with guns and not entertain him with radios. They ain't no radios that I ever heard of—but maybe we can organize a phonograph section for the benefit of some of you timid birds."

The chief of staff had interrupted a further exchange by sending for his car at this moment; and during the course of the morning's spin over the training area, new tragedy developed when a loose stone, thrown up by the fast-moving wheels, fractured the gas line of the big military sedan. The colonel took the ensuing delay as a dire affront to his very recently acquired dignity as a temporary colonel. As soon as they were back at headquarters he shouted for the division adjutant and took peremptory action.

"Major, transfer this man Brunner to the infantry. He's not fit to serve here at headquarters. Send a note along with him making it clear that he broke my car and that I want him put in the ranks at the business end of a musket and kept there as a rifle grenadier. Do it at once—that's all!"

PRIVATE BRUNNER had gone dazedly but without either misgivings or resentment. He had accepted the fact that he did not seem to fit in with the scheme of things military. The purpose for which he had gone into the service was lost. It did not matter much where he served. At least he would have peace for a few days at his new station until they found out that he simply did not fit in.

But shortly after he had presented his orders at the headquarters of the brigade to which his new regiment belonged than a fresh storm broke. He had given his transfer papers to a sergeant. The sergeant had given them to a major who had taken them to the brigade commander himself. The brigade general had emerged livid with passion.

"This is an outrage—an insult to my brigade!" the general stormed. "The idea of headquarters sending a non-combatant to the infantry as a disciplinary measure for breaking that staff whipper-snapper's car."

He walked the floor in agitation, reading the transfer orders and appended note from the division adjutant. His dignity as a newly appointed temporary general of the line was sorely ruffled.

"Not only is it an insult," he went on, "but it's downright interference in my affairs. They can transfer a man to my brigade but the idea of that chief of staff saying he shall be used as a rifleman in Company A of one of my regiments. That's my business, not his, is it not?"

The brigade general turned suddenly upon the bewildered Brunner.

"You'll not go to Company A," he said savagely. "That's one of my crack companies and I'm not sending busted noncombatants from division headquarters there. What do you know about mules?"

"Nothing—nothing, sir," confessed Private Brunner hopelessly.

"Good!" snapped the general. "That qualifies you as a first-class mule assistant in the supply company. You've been used to associatin' with 'em up at division headquarters. Major, get out the order and have the —th Infantry send over for their new mule skinner."

Private Brunner, jerked from his doubtful haven by the sudden summons back to headquarters, climbed reluctantly from the side-car as it drew up in front of the chief of staff's office. Into what new maelstrom was the tide of chance about to swirl him? He fairly winced as an orderly, opening the chief of staff's door, announced his name in a loud voice, "Private Brunner's here, sir!"

The chief of staff, busy with a pile of papers, did not look up. Private Brunner's entrance was hardly an occasion to disturb his labors. Sitting near him in the room was an elderly colonel of kindly, dignified mien who looked the private over with keen interest and spoke at once.

"I've learned from your record card that you speak and write German fluently," the colonel said in a quiet impersonal voice.

Brunner felt the blood surge to his head and his legs weaken under him. He sensed instantly that he faced a serious inquisition.

"Why—why, it isn't my fault," he stammered, taking the defensive at once. He had heard vaguely of the suspicion that attached to men of Teuton antecedents or connections. "My father was sent to Germany, sir, by an American firm several years ago and he—he—he's an American citizen you know—he put me in school there. But I'm not German—we're all good Americans."

"Your card shows also that you are an experienced radio operator—what have you done in the radio line?" the colonel proceeded, ignoring his alibi.

"But I only used them for myself," he pleaded earnestly. "I built my own radio station and worked it because I liked it—because that was the one thing I seemed to be able to know all about."

"I'll have to trouble you for this man at once," the visitor apprised the chief of staff. "Forward his service record and personal effects as I'm taking him now and running no chance of having him get away from us. Fact is we should have picked him up long ago."

"You're heartily welcome to him, I can assure you," responded the chief of staff caustically.

THE visiting colonel motioned the demoralized Brunner into his big military sedan and gave the chauffeur terse orders to proceed at once to general headquarters. Private Brunner sat huddled in abject misery in the soft cushions of the luxurious automobile. A menacing, wracking fear had taken form in his brain. Radio—German! The charge grew momentarily more portentous, more ominous. Perhaps he was on his way at this moment to face a firing squad without further hearing. The fear, as it grew, brought beads of perspiration to his forehead.

"What—what am I being taken away from here for—what have I done now?" he gulped, fear all but mastering him.

The colonel, concerned with his own thoughts and oblivious of the other's forsaken mood, replied casually:

"War is war and we must all pay its penalties cheerfully," he ruminated. "You should have been picked up months ago."

"But—I—I—haven't seen a radio or spoken a word of German since I got into the Army," Private Brunner protested. "Why take me away?"

"It is in poor spirit for you to talk this way," said the colonel, stiffening. "It was wrong for a man of your special qualifications to enlist with an infantry outfit in the first place. It is wrong for you to want to stay there when you're so badly needed for our new radio intercept service."

"Radio service—radio?" echoed Private Brunner, reviving in much the manner of a drowning man who suddenly feels sound bottom under his struggling feet.

"I can appreciate your disappointment," continued the colonel complacently. "It's in the air for every real man to want to fight. But when we came upon your record card yesterday in our search for radio specialists I came down for you personally. We've simply got to have you, regardless of your own feelings—and as for opportunity you'll find room for advancement. I'm making you a staff sergeant tomorrow—and please console yourself in your present disappointment that you'll be doing a highly important work."

And so it was that Private Brunner, lifted from the depths of despair to the heights of ecstasy by this sudden turn of the tide, found himself at the end of a stormy day cast up suddenly into the haven of his dreams. It mattered little now whether his shoulders were smartly erect, or his body responded instantly to the crack of command. A man who could speak German fluently and build and operate a wireless station was worth his weight in gold in the technical service charged with Army communications. Personal qualities no object.

He took his place next day with a blazing enthusiasm in that busy hive of workers behind the lines. He found himself among engineers, chemists, printers, telegraph operators, typists, mechanics, surveyors, meteorologists, mineralogists — specialists gleaned from nearly every known profession. Mars overlooked no calling that might help in the red avocation of war.

A TALL, wiry private drove Sergeant Brunner from place to place over wide distances, the while grumbling at the fate that had landed him at the handles of a side-car motorcycle when he so much wanted to pilot a machine gun or musket.

"Swell job this for a he-man when there's fightin' to be did," Private Smith grumbled, a hopeless victim of the prevailing, carefully nurtured spirit that the fighting man alone might hope to escape ultimate disgrace and oblivion.

The sentiment merely puzzled Sergeant Brunner. As he went to the few American divisions now at the front his interest was not in their battle dispositions and fighting spirit but in the functioning of the radio sections of their signal companies. His first assignment was to familiarize himself with radio communications at the front. It was a simple task finding what there was to be known about the bizarre "E—Trois—Bis" or "E—Dix—Bix" sets which had been borrowed, along with most the other ordnance and signal equipment from the French, to fill in the yawning gaps in American unpreparedness.

Crude devices he found them; tube sets of 10-watt capacity, the interior of each having two 5-watt tubes in multiple, of the direct oscillator type, and boasting two stages of audio frequency amplification. They were portable, if you had a truck for each set. Or in an emergency ten men might carry one by resting every few meters and exercising proper care in transporting the delicate French storage batteries. Completing the set was a simple antenna, three bamboo poles set V shape at an angle of thirty degrees. With such a set the division could cover a radius of from forty to fifty miles with buzzer messages. Brigades and regiments in line were equipped with simple induction-coil oscillators with a buzzer range not exceeding three miles. For all of these the International Morse Code was the common language.

The intercept stations belonging to the Army and now growing up along the rear of the front preliminary to the St. Mihiel and Argonne operations were more elaborate affairs, with as much as eight stages of amplification, radio and audio frequency. It was their function to listen in on enemy radio activity, pick up hostile combat orders, reports and conversations, reduce the enemy code signals to English and communicate the result to higher commanders. Silent goniometric stations, working in unison, were able also to locate enemy transmitting stations by the intensity of his signals which lent themselves to a process of triangulations when picked up by a succession of stations. This gave the long range artillery later occupation. Alert stations along the front were able to pick up German planes in flight by vision and by reporting them from station to station hold them in sight until the American planes could take the air and attack.

When Sergeant Brunner succeeded in working out the precise map location of a German sending station close behind the enemy lines, he would furnish the map coordinates to headquarters with an exultant joy in scientific achievement and no thought of the artillery bombardment that would hurl a ton of high explosives into the stricken area a few moments later. When he would expose, by ingenious interception and decoding, a pending local attack that promptly would be prepared for by artillery concentration, he gave no thought to the crimson surprise that awaited the victims of the disclosure. To him it was all a matter of mathematical and scientific procedure. The infant radio was growing into a giant and he was having a hand in its growth.

BUT just at a time when the swiftly growing young giant was tying in the whole Army with a succession of far-reaching radio nets, there came orders restricting radio use to absolute necessity. Except in great need, other means of communication were to be utilized. Complaint had been made from various sources that the radio nets were becoming more of a nuisance than a benefit. German intercept was readily picking up troop locations through the noisy radio exchanges along the front. A general and his staff had been brought under sudden and unexpected shell fire simply because his radio section had sent the map coordinates of the division P. C. to corps headquarters. German gunners had sent in their respects almost instantly, shelling the general out of his quarters and searching the area forward of the commander's billet with heavy shells all through the night. The loss had been, in addition to the general's sleep and serenity, a matter of something more than two hundred men which, in itself, was some cause for complaint. Other instances of the kind developed—multiplied into serious charges and protests against an unrestricted radio and finally resulted in stringent regulations. Radio must be used for transmitting messages only in emergency. Blinker lights, telephone, *têlégraphe par sol*, visual signals, runners, pigeons—all must be used in preference to the radio where possible.

"I knew it was comin'," sneered Sergeant Major Boles, war broken old file who had been loaned to the American radio by the Wireless Intelligence Section of the British Army as a coach for the inexperienced operators in the larger stations along the American front. "We 'ad the same blarsted tommyrot in our Army and didn't they put the muzzle on just like this! And it wasn't the fault of the radio at all but of a lot of bald idiots sendin' silly messages in the 'clear'."

"And did they find out radio wasn't to blame?" Brunner asked eagerly. He had taken the high command assaults on radio very much to heart, the fear haunting him that orders might come closing all stations.

"They did!" Sergeant Boles replied emphatically, "but it nigh cost 'em the battle of Loos to find it out. Three times Loos was lost if I 'adn't got in there with my radio outfit. The first time 'eadquarters was shovin' in the cavalry thinkin' the for'ard lines bursted when I 'eaded 'em off with a radio message. Later our lads in the village of Loos was about to pull out when I picks up the word with my radio that a big batch of reenforcements was comin' up fast. The third time our own bloomin' artillery was a shellin' right into our own lads. They tried everything from runners to pigeons but they couldn't stop it. I was down with a shrapnel bit in me back, but when I sees what was 'appenin' I got to me radio buzzer and in a couple minutes the artillery lifted up. Rule out the radio, says I, and th' Boche'll whip us yet.

"But yer rankers'll learn," Sergeant Boles added hopefully. "You fellows'll have to stand right behind yer guns an' fight for yer rights. Ain't I been shot half to pieces puttin' my radio by! There's nothin' wrong with radios nohow—it's yer codes that's all wrong—and sendin' messages in the 'clear.' A child can puzzle 'em out. Just from what little I've been listenin' I know yer Army's goin' to try to pinch off old Saint Mihiel salient this month."

"That's a great secret which we ain't allowed to talk about," protested Sergeant Brunner fearfully, casting a frightened look about to make certain they were quite alone.

"Secret is it?" guffawed the British noncom. "And the air's full of it from Nancy to Marseilles. Nobody let me in on yer blarsted secret, did they? But I can 'ear plain straight English sent thru the air in the Morse code. I can tell ye there's to be seven of yer divisions in line and two in reserve for yer main shock which is goin' to bump the 'Indenburg line at Rembercourt and try goin' for'ard to the east bank of that Etang de Lachaussee. You'll have eight more divisions in action and reserve and the French has brought up their Second Army to 'elp ye out. What's more, I can tell you that yer First Army will jump off at five o'clock on the mornin' of the twelfth after all yer artillery has pounded the Boche for four hours and I could tell ye where every one of yer divisions is goin' in if I'd a been keepin' notes on yer field orders number nine!"

HARD on the heels of this disconcerting disclosure came the colonel who had brought Brunner into the radio service. His face was lined and somber and he showed the strain of anxiety and loss of sleep.

"I fear the radio has come into bad repute in some very influential quarters," he confided. "They put a staff officer and a radio operator in an intercept station for three days and he pieced together the entire battle order for Saint Mihiel from messages picked up out of the air. If he could do that, the Boche must have a pretty good idea of what's going on."

Sergeant Brunner turned pale and his hands trembled. Was the dire hour at hand for closing the radio stations!

"But we've shown them that most of the trouble comes not from the radio but from wrongful use of the radio in sending messages in the 'clear' instead of in good stout code," the colonel went on more reassuringly. "They've challenged us to prove that the radio is good for something more than emergency use, and picking up an occasional target, as an offset to its danger. What we're particularly anxious to get for headquarters is the significance of a German code message that has been picked up repeatedly during the past few days."

The colonel drew forth a piece of paper upon which was written the mysterious code message: *Zi* DREI ZEIS NDT ZETM RO*I*ZZ K^2.

"If you'll listen for it you'll hear it from time to time, often as parts of other messages. Our own and French intelligence decoders haven't been able to break it down. Something is going on that we simply must know. Every means has failed. It may be something that will affect our whole operations at Saint Mihiel. It refers either to a withdrawal or a reenforcement, that much we have found out. But it is the most important piece of information in the world for us at the present time."

Brunner took the message with breathless interest. The only parts of it that had any immediate meaning to him were the underscored first and final symbols which must refer to the German sending and receiving stations handling the message in the air. Perhaps he could get a lead to the message itself by comparing the words with other messages that had been broken in the past. Perhaps he could find a key that would unlock the mystery of the whole message. Or perhaps again it was a message of arbitrary code words, without key, that could be deciphered only by observing the German actions that followed the code. In that way he had deciphered code words for lifting artillery fire and initiating a night raid—only to have a new German code come out the next day. And this baffling code message must be solved before its meaning was translated into action by the Germans.

"Work it out in your own way, if you can," the colonel told him, as he turned to leave. "Let me know if you get results. Listen in at this station or go to any of the other stations. Do the best you can. We must know by the eleventh of this month, if the information is to be of any benefit."

BY NOON of the second day thereafter Sergeant Brunner had all but acknowledged defeat. Three times he had picked up the mysterious code words among long German messages but they continued to baffle him as to their meaning. During this time he had not slept; and such food as he had eaten was brought to him from the mess by Private Smith. The old British sergeant, working with him until both his ingenuity and strength gave way, had abandoned the task in despair and gone on to another station.

"Say, that fool thing ain't worth losin' so much good sleep and food over," Private Smith told him disgustedly as he brought Brunner his noon meal, which lay all but untouched. "You take yourself too serious. Why not let this radio fizzle out and then maybe you and me'll get a chance to go to the front and get a bit of excitement."

Sergeant Brunner did not reply. He continued to work vainly with words he had picked up from the big German sending station at Nauen, from which the German war office talked nightly with its submarines at sea and its foreign possessions. That code had stood throughout the war without change, the Prussians believing it unbreakable. Sergeant Boles had dropped shy hints of knowing quite a bit about that code and had given Brunner the meaning in English of three of its code words—but they led nowhere.

"If you wanted to play with toys why didn't you stay home where they's some joy in life," Private Smith bantered him. "You act like you thought it was as important as fightin' at the front."

"From what the colonel says, this is really more important work than shooting a hundred rifles," Sergeant Brunner explains, patiently. "If I can break down one little code message it may affect a whole battle."

"Well, from the rate you're travelin' the war'll be over before you get the thing figgered out," Private Smith protested. "What is it you're workin' on anyway?"

Brunner handed him the baffling code. He glared at it uncomprehendingly a few moments and tossed it back.

"Why don't you wire over to the Heinie operators and tell 'em they're not totin' fair by usin' words we can't understand," Private Smith taunted him.

"We're not allowed to communicate with enemy stations," Brunner replied, ignoring the sarcasm in the other's words.

"Well, when you get tired foolin' with that toy why don't you go over there yourself and ask 'em." Private Smith charged, as he turned to leave. "If I could warble Heinie like you, and was allowed to buzz around the front like you can, I'd sure drop in on 'em some dark night out of curiosity if nothin' else."

An hour later this flippant suggestion had found lodgment in Sergeant Brunner's tired brain. His pencil had dropped from his fingers, he no longer searched the air for buzzings. A plan, preposterous at first, was taking form. Why not, if no other way could be found? The reputation of his radio was at stake. He elaborated the grotesque plan; cautiously at first, then with a constantly growing purpose.

When Private Smith brought his supper he gave peremptory orders.

"Drive to the P. G. enclosure and get me that little German lieutenant—the one we had here last week. Tell them I've got to use him here over night in my code work and that we'll turn him back in the morning. And when you get him here you can have the night off as far as I'm concerned. If I have to go anywhere I'll do my own driving—but guess I'll be busy in the station all night."

Spurred by the prospect of a night off, Private Smith was back in an incredibly short time from the prison of war enclosure with an undersized Bavarian lieutenant. He shoved the lieutenant unceremoniously into the intercept station, and disappeared. Sergeant Brunner without a word of explanation stripped the perplexed but unprotesting officer of his uniform, bound and gagged him and put him to bed with the blankets pulled over his head. He stuffed the uniform into his haversack, locked and left the station, mounted Private Smith's motorcycle and sped away to the north into the deepening dusk.

FORTY kilometers, an hour's run, brought him in rear of the line of a famous combat position. His Army shoulder insignia and air of determination gave him immunity from the military police. He drove without interruption on past the long vistas of deeply echeloned field artillery to the infantry trench position. There he left his motorcycle and made his way rapidly on foot through long weary kilometers of zigzagging communicating trenches past the regimental reserve lines, across the main line of resistance and on into the outpost line of resistance. Reaching the outpost line of observation well after dark he sought out a hole through the deep wire entanglements and made his way into the black and ominous realm of no man's land.

Others, better schooled in the ways of the front lines, might creep breathlessly, listening for the slightest portend of danger; but Sergeant Brunner plunged rapidly ahead, floundering his way through reeking mudholes, stumbling over bits of débris. A flare went up suddenly, turning black night into a greenish, ghastly day. Two groups of ghostly figures, disclosed to each other by the light, exchanged shots and then disappeared into shell holes. Sergeant Brunner, falling into a watery shell hole, hurriedly changed his uniform for that of the Bavarian officer and rushed on. The firing continued intermittently, neither side sending up other flares for fear of exposing its own embattled patrols. The malevolent hissings and buzzings in the air about him were without significance to Brunner. His movements were fixed by the determined purpose that had taken him unchallenged past the military police back behind the front lines.

He heard some one crying in the black void about him, a piercing, curdling cry of agony which seemed to draw nearer as he groped his way forward. The meaning of it did not reach him until he stumbled over a prostrate body. The man gave a sharp cry of pain.

"*Ich bin verwundet,*" the stricken German moaned, taking hold of the floundering Brunner's sleeve and begging piteously to be carried back into the trenches. This situation was not a part of Sergeant Brunner's plan. He must not lose precious moments. He hesitated a moment, then lifted the wounded man with difficulty to his shoulders and staggered on with his burden. The man was larger than he and the weight nearly crushed him into the mud but he managed to keep his feet and totter determinedly on.

Of a sudden he brought up hard against a barrier of barbed wire which set off a noisy rattling of festooned tin pans. Instantly there was another vivid flare of greenish light, a sharp spattering of musket fire and a babble of excited voices.

"*Lieutenant Feldman!*" he cried out at the top of his voice. "*Lieutenant Feldman. Ich will zurück rein kommen!*"

The commotion ceased instantly and an unter-officer rushed out.

"*Entschuldigan sie mir, Herr Lieutenant,*" he shouted, visibly more awed by the sight of an officer than if the flare had revealed a mere enemy raid.

The unter-officer helped Brunner through the wire with his moaning burden. The wounded German oddly enough belonged to his very platoon of the —th Landwehr brigade and was quickly taken in hand by a group of his grateful comrades.

SERGEANT BRUNNER'S mission so obsessed him with its urgency that no thought came to him of his dangerous surroundings. That he was a spy in the enemy's lines, and would be shot at daybreak if detected, did not present itself to him. He inquired bluntly the way to the nearest radio station. The sector commander, a middle-aged reservist captain, came up suddenly and turned a flashlight over him inquiringly.

"Military Intelligence," exclaimed Brunner in flawless German. He had planned out what he should say in just such an emergency.

"Organization?" the captain demanded.

"Headquarters, First Bavarian Corps."

"You have brought in one of my men and I shall make report in the hope that you receive the Iron Cross which you richly merit, Lieutenant Feldman," the Captain responded.

"Please direct me to your radio station," Lieutenant Feldman responded abruptly.

The nearest radio station belonged to the —th Austro-Hungarian Division. It was located about three kilometers from the front lines and to this place Brunner was piloted by a guide detailed by the obliging sector commander who was only too glad to be of some assistance to a corps headquarters lieutenant who had carried in one of his men and whose high sense of duty was such that he showed no flicker of interest in the coveted Iron Cross. The station was in a small dank dugout, illumined by a single electric bulb. The operator sat with the glazed stare of an automaton, headpiece of his receiving set fixed over his ears. There was nothing in the air just now that concerned his station and no messages to send. The sector, except for intermittent patrol activities out in no man's land, was as dull as an isolated countryside. The sight of the lieutenant brought the operator to his feet with a jump, his hand to his head in instant salute.

Brunner asked the operator quietly for his current code sheet and the German, turning methodically to his carefully arranged files, produced the document at once. What was there extraordinary in that a lieutenant from corps headquarters should desire to inspect his code? Brunner searched the long list of code words avidly. One by one he located the words of translation of the mysterious message. His heart leaped with joy as the black veil of secrecy lifted.

"Withdraw at once on Metz and Thionville," the message unfolded.

He handed the code sheet back to the operator with simulated indifference, restraining with difficulty a mad impulse to leap with joy and run swiftly for his own lines with the precious secret. Once out in the trench again it was a simple matter to follow the guide back to the outpost line and creep back through the wire into no man's land. Floundering in muddy holes, stumbling and tripping, he clambored on, conscious only of the glorious fact that he had succeeded in breaking the black mystery of the secret code. There had been no thought in his mind that he had gone as a spy into the German lines. There had been no thought of the hazard of the mission. He had been fired by alertness and determination to succeed—to get information that he needed to sustain the worth of his radio service.

He brought up suddenly in the darkness against another clanging of pans and again there were leaping tongues of flame that filled the air about his ears with hideous hissing serpents.

"American sergeant!" he shouted frantically. "I want back in."

The firing ceased, a chorus of voices swore at him outrageously and a corporal came out with profane inquiries as to what he was doing out there running around like a crazy man against the American wire in the dead of night. As the corporal took him by the arm to lead him he uttered a sudden outcry and poked a pistol in Brunner's ribs.

"Stick up yer hands and keep ahead of me—it's a damned Heinie!" he yelled.

It was not until he had displayed his now precious Army orders, authorizing travel over all parts of the front, and had produced his American uniform from his haversack, that he was able finally to convince the outpost commander of his indentity as a bona fide American soldier. Even then the officer insisted on sending a sentinel back with him to check up on his story of having an official motorcycle cached back of the lines.

"I—I was so busy thinking about—about my work that I forgot to change uniforms," he explained awkwardly.

"It's a lucky thing for you we have a patrol out so we couldn't set off a flare or you'd been shot to pieces if we'd caught a glimpse of you in that outfit," the outpost lieutenant assured him. "The front is no place for an absent-minded man. You intelligence snoopers are a queer lot, anyhow."

THE first flush of a September morn was relieving the black shadows that cloaked the silent movement forward toward Saint Mihiel of huge masses of American troops when Sergeant Brunner, driving with the speed of the wind, swept into Euzivan just ahead of the daylight he had been racing to beat. He pounced from the motorcyle, letting it crash to the ground in his joyous excitement, and entered the dark station.

Things at the station were as he had left them. He uncovered the German lieutenant, who looked up at him malignantly; then unbound the prisoner, took the gag from his mouth and bade him dress himself. The lieutenant rubbed the stiffness out of his limbs gratefully. As he took up the uniform he held it to the light and muttered an oath.

"You've been over in our lines—and

you've ruined my uniform," he grumbled, holding the wet and muddy garments up accusingly.

Sergeant Brunner cast an apprehensive glance at the uniform and shook his head. Another man might have boasted of his exploit and twitted the German on the stupidity of his countrymen, but such badinage was not in Brunner's makeup, nor did an admission of the facts suit his purpose.

"Have a care that you do not get picked up as a spy and hanged one of these fine nights," the lieutenant cautioned him.

"But I am a radio man, not a spy, and I have no need to go into your lines," Brunner told him. "Besides your head has been covered with a blanket so you do not know for certain that I have been out of this room."

The lieutenant replied with a guttural laugh.

"I am not so stupid that I can't see," he said. "Do I not see my uniform stained with the mud from the trenches near Parfondrupt? There is no other such mud as this—and do I not know the stench of water from one of those stagnant shell holes? My head is not under a blanket now!"

"It must be mud that you brought over with you, then," Sergeant Brunner evaded him. "Anyhow here's some gasoline that you can use to clean your uniform."

"You are a much braver soldier than you let on," the Teuton commented, half admiringly, his feelings mollified by the offer of gasoline.

Sergeant Brunner flushed. "I am interested only in radio operations," he muttered.

The sergeant waited discreetly until the German's uniform was dry and presentable, then sent him back to the P. G. enclosure in the custody of Private Smith who reported sleepily just after morning mess. When the two had disappeared, he called Intelligence on the telephone, asking to speak to the colonel direct.

"I've decoded those words for you," he announced simply when the officer came to the telephone.

"You've done what?" shouted the colonel. "Are you sure, man?"

"Positive, sir," replied Brunner triumphantly. "I'm sure I've got it right."

The telephone receiver clicked and was silent. The colonel had hung up without further comment. Sergeant Brunner asked for a new connection. It bewildered him that the colonel had hung up on him. He had thought they were waiting eagerly for this word—and now they would not wait to receive his report.

BUT his disappointment was short lived. In a few moments the noisy whirr of several motor-cars broke the morning stillness. They brought up before the intercept station and a score of officers of assorted rank, eager-faced and hustling, poured in upon him.

"Did I understand you right—that you have broken down that code," demanded the colonel.

"Yes, sir," responded Sergeant Brunner, striving to appear collected. "I—I followed those words in the air through my radio until I got what they meant."

He handed a slip of paper containing the decoded message to the colonel.

Withdraw at once on Metz and Thionville.

There was a stir of suppressed excitement as the portentous paper was passed from hand to hand. It meant, if true, that the American attack on Saint Mihiel could proceed as scheduled and with every reasonable certainty of tremendous success. Instead of firing in reenforcements to hold the salient the Germans were weakening their forces—probably extricating their heavier artillery and a considerable portion of their nine combat division from the line. It meant, too, that unless the attack was carried on as scheduled, postponement would find the place all but deserted of the enemy and his supplies. It meant, if the message was correct, that September 12 was the time to strike in order to gain a brilliant victory at little cost; that the salient which had cost thousands of French lives in futile combat might now be had with a minimum of risk.

"But how do you prove your code," demanded the colonel.

"I just—just worked it out," Brunner explained confusedly. "I listened in for two nights—until I got it right. I'm sure, positive, I can't just explain it all in a minute—but I'm sure."

The group of officers went over the code with him, word for word. It was simply an arbitrary code, with no key words. Each word had been assigned a code meaning. Small wonder it had been next to impossible to break it down. The French had solved the words "Metz" and "Thionville" to a certainty. One of their operators had suspected the word "withdraw," but he was not certain. It might be "reinforce"—and the difference might spell a difference of ten thousand lives, or more.

"This is a most serious matter, Sergeant," the colonel cautioned Brunner. "Lives and reputations may depend upon the accuracy of your work. Are you certain you have made no mistake?"

"You—you can hang me if I'm not right," vowed the sergeant with such earnestness that his decoded message was accepted without further ado.

The French liaison officer fairly danced with delight.

"Zis is magnifique, Sar-geant," he exclaimed. "You shall have from our government ze Croix de Guerre wiz palm."

A staff lieutenant colonel sobered instantly, then glowered at this bright assurance. He wore the Croix de Guerre himself, awarded for some exploit or other, with which he had gotten a mild whiff of gas and a wound chevron. The suggestion of giving the war cross to a non-combatant was offensive to him. The war cross must not be cheapened.

"Not too fast, Captain," he cautioned the liaison officer. "You'd hardly give the Croix de Guerre to a non-combatant."

"Why not?" inquired the captain with an inevitable shrug of the shoulders. "Eet have been done before!"

"But hardly for radio work so far back of the lines."

"As you pleez," the captain quickly corrected himself, bowing politely. "We shall giv heem, then, ze Medaille Agricole—for he should have ze medaille for zis splendid bizness, as you call eet."

"This will put the radio on the map stronger than ever, Sergeant," his colonel announced as the party moved abruptly out to carry information that would now assure a continuance of the movement of a huge army for immediate battle. It will probably also make you a lieutenant."

Sergeant Brunner, fairly bewildered with joy, was only vaguely conscious of the silent glowering Private Smith in the room.

"Why didn't you tell 'em the truth!" Private Smith demanded hotly, when they were alone.

"What do you mean?" Sergeant Brunner asked him, startled by the private's strange, almost belligerent manner.

"You stand right there like a ninny and let that SOS lieutenant colonel talk you out o' the Croix de Guerre—if there hadn't been so much rank in the room I'd a spoke right up myself and told 'em."

"Told them—told what?" Brunner inquired nervously.

"Told what Heinie told me—that you went right over there among the Heinies to get that information."

"Sh-s-s-sh!" whispered Sergeant Brunner, looking about him apprehensively. "Not so loud. What you trying to start, anyhow?"

"Trying to tell you they robbed you," Private Smith shouted hotly. "The idea of lettin' them call you a con-combatant. Man, it takes spine to go right over in Heinie's lines and snake his code right under his nose. Croix de Guerre for fighting men! Bah, Brunner. I thought you was a little yellow shrimp yesterday but the Congressional Medal ain't none too good for you and I'm goin' to see that you get it."

"You—you're going to—to—do what?" Sergeant Brunner's voice trembled with a strange apprehension and his eyes lighted up slowly with an unfathomable omen.

"I'm goin' to let 'em know you're a real soldier with a spine big enough to wear the best fightin' medals they got—I'm goin' to see that they get the truth since you ain't gifted with the gab to let 'em in on the secret," Private Smith effervesced.

"Darn you!" cried Sergeant Brunner, uttering his first direct expletive, then giving way suddenly to a half-hysterical rage as he lifted his clenched hands in an almost comical gesture of menace under the big private's nose. "Darn you, anyway, can't you keep your mouth shut—can't you—before you go and ruin the reputation of my radio!"

Sergeant Brunner has another adventure in next month's Everybody's. Ared Whiteh as called this new story "Mlle. Belgique."

Beginning

Captain Dingle's

Brutal Saga of the SEA

Flying Kestrel

CHAPTER I

THE *KESTREL'S* FLIGHT

HOMEWARD she flew. A stately ship, all sculptured ivory in the sun. Gleaming with golden tints at the shadow edges; glossy of hull, because of distance. Flirting the sprays about her head; trampling down the broken seas at her quarters; leaning, bowing, soaring; thrumming with the wind's strong stress, piling foam at her forefoot, speeding homeward, with the harbor headlands in sight.

A fierce weight was in the gale, for all that it blew out of a smiling blue sky, with never a fleck of cloud to feather the sunlight. It drove the old *Kestrel* roaring along at a speed that must have caused a good many pairs of eyes to blink aboard the two big modern steamers which shared the glinting picture with her. Thick smoke poured from the funnels of those steamers. The white water at their sharp stems rose higher. A broadening of their wakes told of increased speed and a determination to show the ancient clipper something about steam. And still the sailing ship sped serenely on, without fuss of smoke, without visible perturbation indicative of straining for speed; but inexorably passing the steamers, leaving them astern of her in full sight of the harbor heads, and the pilot boat standing out to meet all three. She looked like a toy of rosy tinted ivory, delicately carved and set against a background of blue satin, a thing of sheer loveliness compared with the grim and sturdy materialism of those two steam freighters. And for once, beauty outpaced prosaic utility.

That was the *Kestrel* from the outside. She was one of the last survivors of a mighty line; the darling of deep-water sailormen almost half a century before. What power within her old bulwarks was it that could still call forth the magic her builders had hidden within her swift shapeliness? The chagrin those steamer men had doubtless experienced could be attributed to no less than a crew of supermen aboard the flying *Kestrel*.

Within, the old clipper did not look so magnificent. There was an aged look about her stanchions and scarred decks. But the stanchions were clean scraped and oiled. The scarred decks were white as sharks' teeth. The masts were dark with age; but they stood like trees against the support of rigid, flawless rigging. The lofty royals seemed ready to burst with wind. The slender spars looked about to crack under the terrific stress that was driving the old ship to a mad speed that conquered steam. Along some of the planks the caulking could be seen working, as if the harassed hull was at the limit of endurance, on the point of falling apart.

And the crew. At the pump amidships a sullen gang labored without enthusiasm, but with very complete efficiency. The green water gushed from the pump lips at each clanking stroke of the brakes; and a scowling mate pumped with the gang. Leaning against the fife-rail, dripping with sweat, another gang headed by another mate recovered breath to pump again. Water poured over their bare feet and spouted from the lee scuppers; water, flirted up by heavier sprays to windward, sluiced over the forecastle head and joined the rest in the waterways. Nobody among the double pump gangs had time or inclination to watch the glorious fight the *Kestrel* was making against the steamers. Those who saw anything at all saw the pilot schooner standing out to meet them, and judged therefrom how many more spells would be needed at the pumps.

AT A red-curtained port-hole in the break of the poop, facing the main deck, a small, bright-eyed, wild, brown face looked out at the gushing water. It was a girl's face, an Eastern girl's face, and in it was the look of a child prematurely initiated into all the mysteries of life. There was a half-savage timidity, and knowledge, and fear.

Above the port-hole, beyond her vision, stood a man. He glanced at the steamers dropping astern; he glanced at the pilot vessel; and he scowled at the toiling men. He was unlovely and dour until he swept his glance aloft and around his ship. Then something human shone in his haggard, embittered face. There was pride, and fellowship, and utter understanding in his glance. To see him gently pat the teakwood poop rail, to hear him murmur crooning words to the ship as she hurled the seas behind her, was to get a glimpse of a man who had no share in the ownership of the exterior man.

The seaman at the wheel wore a bandage about his head. He wore an empty knife-sheath too. But he regarded the skipper's back as if he were ready to attack him armed with nothing but the empty sheath.

THE *Kestrel's* master nodded heavily. In his eyes was the weariness of death. He shook his hand, like a fighter almost out who sees an opponent slithering toward him with the finishing punch ready; and the men at the pumps slackened speed, casting appraising looks aft. The mates gave but scant attention to them, for both were attentively regarding the pilot boat, now so near. One of the steamers began to creep ahead; and as if no weariness could utterly numb the brain within the master's skull, there rang out from the nodding figure a metallic shout which electrified the pumping gang and made the helmsman stiffen at his wheel.

"Pump and empty her, you sullen swine! Where's the mate? Mister, if you're bent on sinking my ship, step up here and tell me! Relieve the pumps, you skulkers; and the rest o' you get the three skysails set. D'ye hear me?"

As if released by springs the two mates sprang to obey, cursing bitterly under their breath. The weary gang at the pumps let go, and the rested gang stepped in their places. The water gushed more copiously. The released men trooped at the heels of the mates, some clearing the skysail gear, three scampering aloft to loose the flimsy sails. And each and every man had a separate curse to lay on the man at the poop rail.

"He is not a man! He is the devil's father!"

"Soor! My knife is thirsty!" muttered a lean Lascar.

"There is yet time before we anchor, to pay all scores," crooned a loose skinned little Bengali who had joined the ship in full flesh. Dyak, Lascar, Bengali, Greek; rakings and scrapings of the Eastern ports; full of sour hate, seething with bitter memories; all willing to rend the haggard man at the poop rail; all waiting for a leader. Even the mates leaned toward the side of the men; but Frisco was in sight, the pilot boat was almost within hail, they could endure. The men climbing aloft to the skysail yards slowed in their ascent, for none believed that the master meant to pass the pilot schooner. Why hurry, when as soon as the skysails were set they must be furled again? Besides, from their superior altitudes they could see the helmsman nervously fidgeting at the wheel, licking his dry lips, glowering at the back of the master.

"Will you get those sails set?" shouted the master, and the very timbre of the voice goaded the men to speed again. The pumps clanked faster; the mates bawled louder; the men at the mastheads scampered up the slender bare poles to the skysail yards as three pistol shots spat out and three heavy bullets whanged past three startled heads.

Abeam the fastest steamer forged through the seas at fourteen knots, the sea abreast of her all black with heavy smoke. The pilot schooner edged up closer to the wind, her small boat overboard, all ready to put off for the flying *Kestrel*, and the pilots aboard of her were evidently in a quandary as to what the big square rigger meant to do, since men were aloft aboard of her and instead of taking in sail seemed about to set more.

The helmsman left the wheel, glowering at the skipper's back. And as if the superhuman vitality that had kept him alert hitherto was redoubled in this last emergency, the master swung around at the same instant and reached the seaman with a swift, sure stride that left the man breathless. In the swift approach, the master of the *Kestrel* slipped his pistol into his pocket, and when he faced the helmsman it was with bare hands and a grin of wolfish ferocity. The three men aloft saw it all. There was not much to see. The master gripped the terrified helmsman by the throat with two hands like steel claws, tripped his feet with a single kick, and dragged him to the poop ladder down which he hurled him.

"Put him to work, mister!" the master shouted to the mate, and turned aft again at speed to take the untended wheel before the storming ship had veered half a point from her course. Then, laying his pistol on the wheel gear casing, the master conned his ship with uncanny skill, while all hands flew to their work as if driven by the devil.

The man he had flung down the ladder picked himself up with the blood streaming into his eyes from a flapped eyebrow and ran like a scared cat to the pumps. Men made room for him, swearing vengeance but keeping their faces toward their job. The skysails fluttered, until restrained by their sheets, and to a vicious, tuneless drag they leaped aloft as the halliards were manned.

THE old *Kestrel* quivered. Water lipped the scuppers and fought the outpouring gush from the bilges. The little wild brown face at the saloon porthole pressed closer to the brass rim, from which it had hastily drawn back when the helmsman hurled down past it; and the fear in the dark eyes widened them and made them awful in their intensity.

But the grim figure at the helm steered his ship without thought or glance at anything else than the presumptuous steamer out there between the *Kestrel* and the shining California shore. The clipper leaned to the added sail pressure until she thrummed through the seas like a terrified cachalot. The small boat of the pilot vessel danced across the jumping seas in the big ship's course, her steersman confident that the *Kestrel* would swerve into the wind or back her mainyards to take the pilot aboard. But there was no such intention. The grim master of the *Kestrel* held his course, with his gaze fastened upon the steamer, and only had a fleeting glance for the pilot when the mate sang out that the boat was almost under the trampling bows. Then there was a crash of breaking oars, the small boat was hurled aside on the roaring bow wave of the ship, and the master's voice clangored out:

"Heave those men lines and pick 'em up!"

The *Kestrel* foamed on. Frantic men furled rope ends; and, half drowned, pilot and crew clutched them and were dragged on board. The steamer slowly lost ground. The pilot and two furious boatmen stamped aft and mounted the poop ladder to confront the madman who had run them down.

"Mister!" bellowed the master. "Set the jib topsail!"

"Never mind jib topsails," the pilot raved, shaking a fist in the master's face. "You run me down. Are you crazy, or—?"

"Who the hell asked you to come aboard? Get for'ard and lend a hand, unless you want to swim back to your vessel, mister!" was the cold retort. And the two boatmen, looking once into the grim, haggard face, seeing the fiery, glinting eyes, only stammered half of their prepared protest and obeyed. The pilot took a second look, but he too obeyed. There was no pilot flag flying at the *Kestrel's* lofty truck, nor had there been.

So the ancient *Kestrel* swept past the pilot schooner; and the presumptuous steamer; and the other steamers who gave up the fight long ago; and sailed proudly into San Francisco Bay under full sail like the old queen of the sea that she was, coming to anchor and riding there like a stately reminder of a dead and glorious past.

CHAPTER II

THE MASTER OF THE *KESTREL*

VAL ORSON sat upon the rail near the gangway and stared sardonically at the clustering small boats which dared not venture too near. The *Kestrel's* snowy wings were folded; and a clumsy sort of folding it was. The sails were bunched up on the yards, wrapped around with the gaskets like bundles of dirty washing. The men had refused duty after those gaskets were passed, and the two harassed mates had no heart to drive them. Some of the men already in the boats alongside, cursing at Orson, shaking futile fists at him, promising dark and dreadful happenings if ever he stepped on shore. Other men hovered around the forecastle doors, glancing furtively aft, talking side-mouthed with shipmates inside, dubious still concerning that sardonic, motionless figure on the poop rail.

"He's all in, mates. Let's go get him," growled one.

"Hell, he ain't never all in," rasped a voice inside the forecastle. "Look what happened to the gal when she tried to knife him asleep. She had a chance, didn't she? Wot chance 'ud we have, in daylight? Wait, and cop him ashore, I sez."

"Come on out o' that hell-ship, you fellers!" bawled one of the crew who had already entered a shore boat. "Ain't you got the heart to say so-long to that bloody man-killer?"

There was no change in the expression on Orson's haggard, tired face. He watched the rest of his crew slink out and cross the rail, some with bags, some without, but all with hatred for him expressed in grinning teeth and glittering eyes. His face did not change when the second mate appeared dressed for the shore and took a hurried run into a waiting boat. His expression was scarcely capable of change; he looked what he felt, contempt for such scum as could be driven from a ship by one man, even though that one man were himself.

The chief mate walked on to the poop. Orson did not look around at his footstep. That was one of the many things which kept men under Val Orson's subjection; his mysterious power of command over himself which never permitted him to show interest or fear, yet never failed to bring him to the scratch of advantage in emergency. The mate might have been meditating assault. Some of the men in the boats, now pulling away and having a broader view of the ship's deck, seemed to expect that was in the mate's mind. They bellowed encouragement. Still Orson ignored the mate, who stood awkwardly by.

"Crew's gone, sir," the officer stammered presently.

At the moment there was one boat just leaving the ship's side; and up from the saloon flew the Malay steward, almost pale from nervousness, with his belongings tied in a linen bundle. Orson laughed at last. The little brown man darted a frightened glance up at the grim figure on the poop, then sprang upon the rail, frantically waving his bundle at the last boat, screaming to the boatman to wait for him. His bundle fell into the sea, and Orson stepped from the rail laughing contemptuously. That laugh sent the palpitating steward overboard in panic, and the last of the *Kestrel's* crew had left the ship, excepting the chief mate, and to him Val Orson turned abruptly.

"The rats have gone, you mean! There's your last chance to join them, mister," pointing to the boat in which the half-drowned steward was being emptied of water.

"I'm in no hurry, Captain Orson," the mate said, coloring.

"Mean to get your pay, huh?"

"I've earned it, sir."

"Well, you can get it tomorrow. I'll remember that you neither refused duty nor quit the ship, if that's all that's bothering you. Might as well get ashore. I suppose you've had enough o' me, like the rest."

"I've had plenty o' you, Captain. A very little's a big plenty," returned Mr. Martin with astonishing boldness. "I like the ship, though. She's a beauty, and can't help her skipper. I'll stay by her unless I'm discharged, sir."

For the second time Val Orson laughed, and this time there was a new note in his laughter. His face was neither sardonic nor grim when he looked fixedly into the mate's uncertain eyes.

"You're a bold man, Martin," he said. "From the moment when the cook jumped into the health doctor's boat, the first rat, up to this moment, I haven't seen one damned man aboard this ship I wanted to stand by. You might have said you liked me. I'd have said you lied. No man likes me. But when you say you like my ship, I believe you. A sailorman must like her. Stay by the ship if you want to. Damn good thing we've got a cargo of tin. That won't spoil if she sinks under you while I'm ashore to report."

Mr. Martin stared after the skipper as he went below to dress, as if he suspected liquor. It was a long time since any man had heard Captain Valentine Orson deliver himself of a speech of such length. It was a long time, too, since any man had told Valentine Orson his personal opinion of him at the length of an arm.

IN THE cabin, Val Orson sat at the table trying to keep awake long enough to fill out his port papers. There were the pratique certificate; the register; manifest; bill of health; last light bill; list of stores; search note, etc., etc. And to take ashore for paying off the crew, if the crew appeared for paying off, which was unlikely, since the mate had not given the time-honored "That'll do, men," therefore, they had deserted the ship. He had to prepare the ship's articles; official log, and the seamen's last discharges. These papers glimmered up from the red table-cloth at his tired eyes until he could have readily torn them all into shreds in order that he might fling himself down somewhere and sleep. He kept awake by heroic measures; twigging the hairs in his nostrils. But even that infuriated him. His will power was great, his brain was alert, but his physical muscular being cried for surcease. His head touched the table, spilling the ink bottle; and then from his stateroom crept a small brown woman who had in her eyes the wide frightened look of a wild creature, and who touched his bowed head with her flowerlike hands as if she touched a god.

Val Orson was "out" at last. The crew that had run like rats from the ship would have gloated. His grizzled hair lay in a sopping pool of ink; his glittering eyes were closed in a sleep of tremendous exhaustion. The papers he had prepared lay under his outflung hands; and the cabin clock, ticking with hollow rhythm, indicated in vain that the hour was late; that he would soon be unable to report his ship's arrival until tomorrow.

The brown girl perched on the table beside him, gently raised his head, and laid it on her lap. Then her soft fingers caressed his temples, separated the tangled hair, and revealed a long, wicked looking scar running across the scalp. The dark, wide eyes grew somber at sight of it. The small, slim figure grew tense, and under the gaudy silken bodice the round, girlish breasts rose and fell. Very softly the fingers stroked that great scar. Softly the red, full lips touched it. And the girl sat motionless thereafter for hours, aching with exquisite cramps in her constrained position, willing to endure worse that he might rest untroubled.

Once, when it had grown dark, Mr. Martin came below to see if the captain had perhaps gone ashore unseen by him while he was in the galley. He lit a lamp, and looked full into steadily blazing eyes which told him very clearly that he had better be about his affairs and never dare to disturb Val Orson. Martin glanced at the ship's papers, then took himself off to his own cabin to smoke and ponder.

Every sailorman from end to end of the seven seas knew or had heard about Val Orson and the *Kestrel*. Orson had put in almost all of his seagoing life in the famous old clipper. There was a period when she had been sold "foreign," having outlived her best days; and during that period Val Orson had vanished from the greater ports. Rumor had much to say regarding him. Variously he was suspected of having been in jail; a-pirating; smuggling; treasure hunting. Actually, all that was known was that he reappeared suddenly one day at the helm of a decrepit and shamefully misused old square-rigger, which was half-way manned by a hangdog west coast crew who ran like curs before the anchor was down. It took the waterfront habitués only a very short time to spread the news that Val Orson was back again, and had bought the old *Kestrel* and sailed her in to refit and load cargo.

Cut down, the old clipper had been by her foreign owners, to save men. The job had been butchered, also to save money. Those dainty skysail yards that had been her pride in many a far-eastern port in the proud days of clipper ships, had been sent down and sawed and chopped up for firewood. The royal yards too had come down. The masts, however, had been left standing, gaunt and bare, to mock the eye with memories of former graces. In like fashion, the yards had been stripped from the mizzenmast entirely. The *Kestrel* had been sailed as a barque instead of as a ship; but the mizzenmast was still the old ship's mizzen, with topmast, topgallant and royal mast, and slender skysail pole. Paint had never been wasted by the foreign vandals. When Orson sailed her home again, she was forlorn and unkempt like some derelict that had wandered for ages on a dead sea. So she looked; and men, when Val Orson was not near by, snickered and said he had bought a coffin for himself.

HE FITTED her out. How, none but himself knew. Men quit him, driven away by his mad ferocity. He worked harder himself. If a man, or a gang, only stayed half a day, that man or that gang performed a full bout of work before quitting. That was inevitable. No man ever cheated Val Orson of his due of labor, as long as Orson was at hand in person. So the old, flaked paint was scraped away, and new paint put on. Yards went aloft again, on mizzenmast, and fore and main. There were problems to be tackled in replacing that lofty rig, and they were not all problems of rigging. There would always be the problem of crews. Let Val Orson have his lofty clipper towed around to a port where no man knew him, and he might secure a full crew. But that would be the only time a full crew manned his ship, for they would quit at the first dropping of the anchor. Orson had been a bucko as a mate, and man-killer as a master. Sailing with him in a three-skysail yarder was going to be no bed o' roses for sailormen; and when that three-skysail yarder was fifty years old, and had survived what the old *Kestrel* had survived, there was but little nourishment in the job for anybody.

So in the rigging of the ship there was the problem to face of substituting mechanical expedients for a doubtful human quantity. Tackling this in his own masterful fashion, Orson had made use of all the trick inventions of patent reefing gear, gipsy winches, rigging screws, and the rest. That was evidence of madness, men said. If he wanted to run the old ship cheaply until she saved him further expense by sinking with him, he could have let her keep the shortened rig the foreigners had disfigured her with. But, much though they knew, they knew little of Val Orson's soul. Val Orson had a picture painted on the inside of his big sea chest, a picture by a Japanese artist of godlike skill, and it showed the *Kestrel* speeding like a glorious creature full of vibrant life, clothed to the dogvanes with gleaming canvas, a rainbow in the shattered spray at her golden figurehead, milk-white foam at her lee bow and lean flank, and sunlight singing in every glistening line of her oiled spars and tarred rigging. Few men knew of that picture's existence. Fewer men knew that every night while refitting the ship, when the stubborn conflict of the day's work was done, Orson sat for hours with the chest lid raised, gazing at the picture, mentally comparing the progress of his labors with that lovely presentment. It mattered not at all how fierce had been the day; that evening hour had the softness of an hour of devotion before a sacred shrine.

None knew so well as he to what degree age and neglect had eaten into the old ship's vitals. Men might call her his coffin. He knew very well that she might prove to be even that. But he knew that before his coffin was in demand every ounce of hard driven man power, every cell of a sea-cunning brain, every last sob of a sailor's fighting soul would have been hurled upon the expiring fires of a lost endeavor.

And so the *Kestrel* was refitted outwardly in the glory of her prime. She had so arrested the eye by her amazing transformation that Orson had secured a crew for the first voyage out East; and he had secured a cargo, which was a rather more subtle compliment, since shippers are ever more scrupulous and critical concerning the bottoms they ship in than are sailors. Even Ken Martin had fallen for her appearance; and Martin knew a ship. What Martin lacked was a knowledge of Val Orson. Only hearing of him, from a long, long distance, Martin believed he was only another instance of the genus bucko, and Martin knew buckos.

It took but a few days of that initial outward passage to determine relative values aboard the rejuvenated *Kestrel*, for she was wracked and nail-sick, keeping men by the pumps throughout the passage; her master proved a driving fool, whose daily delight was to cast up the reckoning to a decimal point, after driving his crew to the point of mutiny which he had an inhuman knack of quelling unaided, and compare the day's run with some one day's run out of a decade-old log kept when the *Kestrel* was the pride of the China fleet.

Then of course the crew jumped ship in the first anchorage. Even the second mate skipped. Martin stayed by the ship because he was a married man, first of all, but really because he had a sailor's pride in a fine ship, and had seen that the *Kestrel* was a has-been kept going and made to keep going by a man who might be mad, but who was a sure enough sailor. There had been a tedious round of Eastern ports before Banca tin supplied a cargo. How the shippers ever trusted precious ore to the old *Kestrel* was a mystery known only to Orson and his agent. But there it was. And somehow a crew was raked up. That is, a number of men secured, perhaps by methods as devious as those by which the tin ore was obtained.

THE voyage home had been a nightmare. Martin had not entirely awakened from it yet. There was first of all the Malay girl. Nobody knew she was on board until the ship cleared Banca Straits; that is, nobody except Orson. Everybody knew at once, when any body knew. That was a side to his character that Orson's critics and enemies had hitherto overlooked or at least remained quiet about. Perhaps keeping quiet was the proper term, since sailors since Noah's day have ever been indulgent toward brothers of the cloth where a lady fair crept in.

Orson's lady was not fair. She was a spitting, wildcat thing scarcely big or old enough to be called woman even in the precocious East; and when Orson carried her on deck that first morning at sea, she had writhed in his arms like a python, clawing, biting, screaming, until she saw within reach a sailor with a knife at his belt; then she had reached out, with astounding surety snatched the knife, and stabbed Orson in the head. All hands saw it; for it was at the hour of changing the morning watch, when every man was on deck to swing up the gear all around after the night's dews. It was the first illustration the new crew had of Orson's possibilities for trouble. Martin, who had learned to respect the sheer manhood in the skipper, was shocked at the manner in which that stab was received. There was no dropping of the girl, no outburst, no falling to the deck. Though his scalp and face streamed blood, and he reeled under the vicious stroke, Val Orson retained his grasp of the girl until he carried her over to the skylight above the saloon, where he set her down as gently as if she had kissed him with her red lips instead of with steel; and a fat Bengali, a lean Lascar, and a conjecturing Greek-Dyak half-cast who had early-on contemplated murder went about their business thoughtfully.

Orson had taken the girl's shawl and bound his head with it. Then he had taken the girl in his great arms and patted her naked shoulder, talking to her in the Dyak dialect until she no longer had the wildest aspect. There followed days, weeks, months at sea; brutal driving, manhandling, wearisome hardship. And as men saw the old ship kept afloat by the raw he-manhood of the master, they also saw the wild brown girl fall under the spell of the same qualities and turn from slaveship to worship.

Martin recollected all these things as he sat in his little cabin pondering, and the sight of the little brown woman on the table, nursing Orson's ink-coated head in her lap, made him wonder if he knew anything at all about the notorious master of the *Kestrel*.

He was aroused from a sort of dazed reverie by heavy and hurried footsteps on deck and he started to his feet and ran up the companionway in time to encounter a couple of eager young fellows who forced him back by the mere enthusiasm of their youthful errand.

"This is Captain Orson's ship, isn't it? We want to interview him," they cried.

"Captain Orson's resting. You can't see him," Martin retorted. "Better not make any noise, either, or—"

"We must see him!" the youths chorused. They pushed against the mate, peering into the dimly lighted saloon. The dark-eyed girl glared at the intruders. The mate strove against them, but the youthful enthusiasm prevailed.

"Is it true that the *Kestrel's* made a record for sail across the Pacific?" they demanded.

The little brown girl suddenly tumbled over on the table, and Val Orson staggered to his feet, alert, suddenly wakeful.

"Come in, gentlemen!" he said, striding to the foot of the stairs. "Record, d'ye say? I haven't made up the log yet, but if there's talk of a record—sit down and I'll get the log!"

One of the youths giggled at sight of the inked hair; the wild-eyed girl turned upon him with a tigerish snarl; and there was no more notice taken of that ink stain.

CHAPTER III

PRIDE

THE *Kestrel* was taken alongside the discharging berth and Val Orson swelled up with pride. Those young scribes had got their story, and in the manner of their kind had made the most of it. It was a good story too; worthy of being made much of. When Orson stepped ashore, barely within the twenty-four hour limit in which he had to report his ship at the Custom House, the dock was lined with people who came to stare at the man who had beaten a sailing record with a decrepit old has-been like the *Kestrel*. Mr. Martin shared in the glory too, for his place was on the forecastle head in mooring ship; and he ordered the gang of shore roustabouts who handled his lines as if he were the brass-bound chief officer of a first chop tea clipper in the sixties.

The skipper halted ten yards from the gangway, and curiosity seekers gathered around. He seemed oblivious to them; nor did he appear to be concerned about the ship. Running on board again, he went into the saloon, and presently emerged with the brown woman whose small exotic face was alight with eagerness. Mr. Martin, as well as other beholders, grinned a little after Orson's back was turned. Strange things had happened in ships in the Eastern trade; but few shipmates had the temerity to flaunt their little light loves ashore in a home port. There was apparently no fathoming Val Orson. He made his own laws, and only obeyed those when he felt like it. At the street he hailed a cab, put the girl in it, and gave the driver the address of some foreign mission. And the last thing Mr. Martin could see, from the ship by craning his neck, was Orson striding away toward the Custom House, and a disappearing cab in the distance out of which hung perilously half the body of a wildly furious little brown woman who screamed weird curses after the man who had coolly discarded her.

A few of the late crew had been hanging about near the ship; sulking around corners, always in pairs. When Orson stepped down the gangway, these men disappeared, dodging back to places of vantage along the route he must take. But Orson was safe from attack. There were far too many people down there, admiring the old ship, for anybody to pull rough stuff in daylight.

But something happened when the skipper returned in mid-afternoon, having finished his business. He paused only long enough to tell Mr. Martin a few details of the ship's possible future, and to bid him keep strangers off, and went below to gloat over the precious log-book wherein was set down a record passage which he had not dreamed he was making. And lest the fact seemed too amazing, it may be kept in mind that from the moment of losing sight of the land back East, to the splash of his anchor at home, there had never been a day that did not call for every wink of his eye, every vibration of his nerve fibers, in order to keep the ship going and to prevent twenty thirsty knives from slipping between his ribs. On principle he drove the ship. It was her splendid capacity for speed that had endeared her to him years ago. When he drove her to beat those steamers making the harbor, and when he ran down the pilot he had never asked for, he was only flaunting his vessel's pride in the eyes of beholders. By just doing that, indeed, he had actually taken an hour from the old sailing record for the passage. It was only when told about it that he verified it by careful correction of times in his reckoning, But since he knew it, Val Orson had no time for other thoughts, no desire to speak of anything else; nor was his desire permitted to urge him to converse about it with others. If asked, he would answer; but by far the deepest thrill was obtained merely by perusing those magic pages and gloating over the result.

IT WAS about the hour when labor should cease for the day, when Mr. Martin was once more heard trying to prevent some persistent people from entering the saloon where Val Orson sat with his precious record. But these folks out-talked Mr. Martin; and, moreover, they did it in an authoritative manner which soon silenced the mate. They trooped down the stairs.

"Damnation! Is my ship a public bar?"

roared the skipper, leaping to his feet in a rage. The sunlight streamed through the skylight, finding the great black ink blot on the table-cloth and giving it the appearance of an eclipse in a red, red sky.

"Just a moment, captain, before you blow up," said a fine tall man with curly hair. He spoke as if he saw no reason at all for fearing Val Orson. "I am from the Swedish Consul. Two of your men have laid complaint against you."

"I am from the Greek. Also I have complaint," another man said with a white toothed smile. There were two more, a cheery Britisher, in the interests of the once fat Bengali and three always lean Lascars; and a Portuguese who seemed far less concerned about the complaint he came to investigate than in the faded splendors of the rather stately old saloon he had entered.

Val Orson's eyes blazed.

"Leave your complaints, and I'll attend to them in the morning," he snapped. "My papers are deposited in order, and what any complaints can be about you will find in the log."

The Portuguese had been stepping around the saloon, and at the mizzenmast paneling was now closely examining a beautifully carved bas relief of a kestrel hawk in flight.

"Captain," he cried, with subdued excitement, "can it be that this is the famous old *Kestrel*, once a crack ship of the China trade?"

"Certainly. What other craft could break records at nigh sixty years old?" retorted Orson.

"You are a lucky man to command her, sir!" the Portuguese said warmly. "My countrymen tried to buy this ship when they bought the *Cutty Sark*, the *Thermopylæ*, and other grand clippers."

"Pity they didn't. They wouldn't have treated her as she was treated by the damned ship murderers who did have her. Greeks, they were."

"My country have not much experience with sailing ship like this," the Greek smiled with a shrug. "But we have good sailors, yes. I have a complaint here, captain—"

"Speaking of crack clippers, was this ship ever as fast as *Cutty Sark* or *Thermopylæ?*" drawled the pleasant Britisher.

"This ship has had a most glorious career," the Portuguese declared. "Perhaps she has been fortunate in her captain on this last astonishing voyage." He bowed to Orson, and Orson beamed with pride. There was a bell on the table, and the skipper pounded it twice before he recalled with a flash of embarrassment that he had no steward.

"Have seats, gentlemen, I want you to try some wine I bought in Java," he said.

When the wine had been around twice, there was in progress a warm argument concerning ships, sailors, and kindred things. The tall Scandinavian had little to say, but said it with the deep understanding of his race in matters maritime; and without offense he upheld the reputation of his people as seamen. The Portuguese spoke with pride of his nation, justly. It was to Portugal that many a glorious clipper had gone in her mellow age. If the Portuguese had ceased buildings ships, they had certainly retained their keen eye for class. The slow speaking, genial Britisher had little to remark; but he intrigued Val Orson by going very intimately into the details of the record making passage, arguing points of sailing expertly as became a man who had sailed one full voyage as a boy in the flying *Thermopylæ.* The Greek drank wine, and smiled. He remained in the saloon, with the bottle, while Val Orson conducted the other men around the ship in the gathering dusk, showing her off to them as if she were still in the first flush of her glory. Mr. Martin tagged along with a flashlight; and by the time they returneed to the saloon Mr. Martin was almost convinced of the old ship's splendor. He was so helpful, reminding Orson of little points overlooked, that he was invited to take a glass of wine before the guests departed.

"Good luck, captain," the Swede said, raising his glass.

"More records to you, sir," the Briton offered.

"Paying cargoes," was the toast of the Portuguese. The Greek swallowed his wine very quickly, a little unsteady on his feet.

"Captain, here I have a complaint—" he began to state in official tones. His companions laughed, gathered him among them, and bade Orson good evening, trooping up the stairs and down the gangway to the wharf as if complaints were only to be considered as jests—at least at that mellow hour of the evening.

CHAPTER IV

FAME

IT TOOK several days to convince Val Orson that he had become a character. He had always known that men hated him for his hard fisted methods. A driver he had always been; always would be. But here was another sort of fame. It was almost popularity. The crew's complaints had drifted away like mists upon his appearance at the various consulates; where he made affidavit that all hands except Mr. Martin had deserted the ship after refusing duty. And his picture got into the papers. In the big Sunday supplements, fanciful pictures showed his cherished old ship foaming along through turbulent seas with whole fleets of sail and steam craft tailing out astern.

Then one night after the cargo was all out, and the ship had been towed to the anchorage to wait for a call to loading berth, Orson brought on board a newly painted picture of the old *Kestrel* making harbor on that last tremendous passage. It had been painted by a sailor artist, and showed every seam of the canvas, every reef point, every little detail. It was bad art, but no sailor dared say that anything had been left out. There was only one place in his stateroom where a picture of such a size could hang; that place was occupied by a framed picture of a nude woman. Orson snatched that down, flung it into his bunk, and held the new picture up in place of it, estimating the problem of hanging. The stateroom was littered with newspapers. A clipping of every piece of news concerning him or his ship lay in a shallow tray on the desk; the papers from which the clippings came formed the litter. Orson's den looked more like the study of a budding writer than the sleeping place of a notorious hardcase windjammer skipper.

Searching in a drawer for screws with which to fasten his painting, the skipper hurled forth a heap of photographs. There were dozens of pretty faces in that heap—white girls, brown girls, olive beauties, yellow nymphs; and all smiled at him. Val Orson had no eye for any of them. He was enamored of his new picture of his oldest love. The other pictures he bundled into the drawer again as soon as he found the screws he sought.

There were many trifles in that stateroom which eloquently proclaimed that a woman's presence was the rule rather than an exception. Here a port curtain had been looped back with a hair ribbon. The curtain at the head of the broad built-in bed was fastened with nothing less than a dainty garter of ruffled silk. Under the desk, among his own sturdy boots and shoes, more than one pair of high heeled slippers held place; a silk shawl hung from a peg under his own coarse watch coat.

But for these things Orson had no time at present. He sat in his swivel chair, feet up on the desk, smoking a strong black cheroot, and gazing through the smoke at the painted *Kestrel*. He had procured a book of sailing records from a second-hand bookstore, and it lay under his hand, unopened. So far as records were concerned, his old *Kestrel* had them all beaten. The fame of that last passage home worked in Val Orson like a malignant yeast. He had passed the period of enjoying the triumph, and had arrived at the point where he believed himself more than comman man.

Mr. Martin entered the saloon and knocked on the stateroom door. Orson bade him enter as a monarch might have bidden a suppliant. Mr. Martin was hungry. While the ship lay alongside the wharf, the mate had eaten three meals a day at a restaurant nearby, charging the expense to the ship's account. But there was no cook aboard the *Kestrel*, and the shore lay a good fair mile away. Orson had been too full of his pride to think about food.

"Ought to engage a cook, if you don't get a stooard," said Mr. Martin. "Ought to have a watchman, too."

Orson slowly turned, blew out a thick jet of smoke, and nodded toward the new picture.

"Beauty, ain't she?" he drawled. Martin saw the picture. It was a long time since Orson's cabin walls had been without a woman's picture. Martin resented the way his reasonable demand was met and sidetracked. Fame had turned the skipper's head, it was obvious. But fame had done something more; it had increased Mr. Martin's self-esteem. A man can hardly be chief mate of a record breaking clipper lying alongside the dock and not swell up a bit with pride. Everybody knows that a sailing ship can be made or unmade by her chief officer. Mr. Martin had been rather glad to be chief mate of the *Kestrel* when she arrived. Now he was more than glad of mere position. He was aware of his own worth. Furthermore, he was hungry, and he had no intention whatever of standing a lone, hungry watch on a deserted ship in the harbor. Deserted he knew she would be very soon, if Orson lived up to reputation. Orson was never known to live a solitary life of bachelorhood, even at sea. Martin could not yet understand why the little brown woman had been driven ashore. Under some pretext or another the skipper always had a female in the ship; as stewardess, wife, cousin, passenger, sometimes without any explanation. But in such a busy port as San Francisco, particularly now that he was famous and visitors were the rule for a wonder, even Val Orson would be careful about bringing a woman on board. The only thing left was what he probably would do; spend his time ashore until a cargo was secured and a loading berth taken.

"Do you want me to go ashore to eat, captain?" the mate persisted. Orson did not seem greatly interested in the subject. He was squinting this way and that through the smoke, getting new angles on that flying clipper. Martin asserted himself: "Captain Abbott told me he needed a mate in the *Huntress*. He keeps a Chiney cook."

Val Orson reached forward and straightened the picture frame an inch.

"Give my regards to Captain Abbott when you go aboard, Mr. Martin," he said without heat or anger. Martin smothered an oath and ran on deck to hail a shore boat, promising to return for his dunnage in the morning.

As FOR Orson, he sat for an hour before a subtle gnawing inside advised him that his big lean body needed food. Perhaps then for the first time he really missed the presence of others in the ship. In the deserted steward's pantry he found a tin of cabin biscuit and a half of a red Dutch cheese that had survived all the way from Java Head. That, with some of the Java wine, filled him, and with appetite appeased, out of immediate sight of that painting, he came back to more mundane matters than dreams. When he realized that he had let Martin go, he swore savagely; but then he had to laugh at the manner of it. He had never believed the mate was man enough to take him at his word like that. And he did not think any the less of Mr. Martin for doing it. But the occurrence did bring home forcibly the fact that he was absolutely alone in his ship, and something must be done.

With a fresh cheroot he sat on the saloon skylight on the poop, scanning the dark waters for a boat. There was no oil in the cabin lamps, and he was in no mood to search for any. He was in no hurry; but presently there would be a boat, and he would go ashore at once and hire a cook and watchman. The city lights and the stars speckled the Bay; and distant ferry-boats crawled back and forth like many-eyed water bugs. But no boat approached the *Kestrel*. She bore no riding light. Perhaps boatmen regarded her as a barren proposition.

But after an hour of waiting a rowboat swam into the ship's blacker shadow; and as if in response to Orsen's hail it drew in to the ladder.

"You take your time!" growled the skipper irritably, stepping to the ladder head. Somebody was ascending. And a pompous young man pushed past and confronted Val Orson on his own ship's deck.

"Are you Captain Orson?" he demanded, with the tone of one who speaks with privilege behind him.

"Well?" snapped Orson, uncivilly.

"I've come to see you concerning a young native woman who came to our Mission. She charges that you abducted her, kept her in shame, and discarded her on arrival here. Our Mission did what it could for her; but the poor creature disappeared to-day, and I am here to demand that you release her if you have taken her into this ship again."

"That's quite a speech, mister," drawled Orson, spreading his feet and crouching to peer into the man's face. "You was trained in a good school for lying. Or maybe you don't understand women very well. I brought a native girl home. She stowed away in my cabin when she brought my laundry. She kicked and fought all the way home to be released. See here, what she gave me." Taking off his cap, the skipper parted his hair, thrust his head close to the other's face. "Guess you can't see; feel if you want to. She knifed me. I put her in a carriage and shipped her to you folks to take care of her. If you lost her, that's your hard luck."

"The woman says you kept her in your cabin, and forced her to—"

"Mister, you talk too much! You've got your gall talking to me this way on my own ship. Boat ahoy, there! Stand by to pick this up."

Val Orson seized the missioner as he might pick up a sack of flour, and hove him over the rail into the harbor. And then as the boat pulled away after picking up the sputtering victim, the skipper halted it with a shout, remembering that he had meant to go ashore himself. He sat beside the man he had dumped, and listened with grim enjoyment to shivering, teeth-chattering threats all the way to the landing. And when the forlorn emissary promised legal proceedings within twenty-four hours, Orson laughed with great good humor.

"If you find her, your lawyer'll have something to go on," he mocked. "Send her down to me if you get her. I guess I turned her adrift too soon. She was an amusing little hellcat."

He returned on board within the hour, taking a cook and an ancient watchman. But the episode of the missioner had started a train of thought which would not let him sleep. Val Orson had a strong liking for women. He had been without feminine companionship for a long time. And now that the lights no longer shone on his new picture, his mental vision conjured up before him all of his many conquests and they murdered sleep.

CHAPTER V

A NEW FACE

AT THE end of a week there was a cargo for the *Kestrel*, and she was hauled alongside the lumber mills to load. Orson had found shippers overcautious, even with the flavor of that wonderful record to dazzle their eyes. One or two had visited him aboard the ship; they has complimented him, praised his old clipper and drunk his wine. But everybody knew the old *Kestrel* was wracked and tender. Most shrewd shippers believed that no other man could have brought her back to port at all, record or no record. But a lumber cargo will never help an old ship to sink; as many a crooked speculator in dying ships has discovered. There was a load of redwood lumber to go around the Horn, and Val Orson secured this cargo.

Then it was necessary for him to find a mate at least, to take care of the loading for ship's account. And he sought out Mr. Martin. The *Huntress* was ready for sea. Martin had been her first mate for just one week; and on the only occasion Orson had seen him since letting him go, he looked well fed and content. But Val Orson wanted him. A full week's pay had been saved, to say nothing of a week's food, all dutifully paid by old Abbott of the *Huntress*, so Mr. Martin would be a bargain now, and Orson went to get him.

After securing the cargo, Orson's whole attitude underwent a change. For a while he had basked in the sunlight of publicity, and men found him human. Now he was the overbearing master and owner of a record breaking clipper loading an outward cargo; and moreover he was considering a crew. Still more, he was casting eyes at likely waterside ladies. It was his weakness and he never pretended virtue. On one of his journeys through the waterside district he had caught a swiftly fleeting glimpse of one of his late crew, a Greek; and he had been ready to swear that the girl with the Greek sailor was the girl who had run from the mission.

There has been no outcome to the threat of the legal proceedings. There was no girl to produce against Orson. But he had been reminded of her, and he remembered that toward the end of the passage which she had inaugurated by knifing him, the half-wild creature had softened very much indeed. And since his business carried him again through the street where he believed he had seen her, he kept a wide weather eye lifted for anything that looked like an Eastern shawl. It was at the door of the outfitter's from whom he expected to hear news about Mr. Martin's availability that he caught sight of the Greek and the girl and there was no doubt whatever that the girl was she whom he thought he sought. The rapidity with which the Greek sailor vanished around the corner, dragging the girl after him, might hint at a wish to avoid Orson at that moment; if so, it accounted for the utter disappearance of both when the skipper dashed to the corner after him.

"The damned slippery—" Orson cut the sentence short, opened his bright eyes wider and pulled himself together, for a new face had flashed across his view.

Only a flash of a big eyed pink face under a floppy sort of a velvet tam-o'-shanter, but there was something which attracted him even in that. There was shyness, real or assumed; a friendly, toothsome smile; health, youth, and no overwhelming degree of wisdom. There was a certain litheness about the girl, too. Val Orson liked his women lithe. Also not too wise.

The whole street was composed of houses of one pattern. By the time he had regained his wits to hurry after the new face, she had entered one of the houses along the street; and Val Orson strode up and down the pavement twice, swearing at the idiots who built houses all alike. When he had returned to his corner, without success, the outfitter he came to see was standing in his store entrance, and the skipper attended to business. The girl must belong where she had gone, because she had not taken time to knock at the door but had gone straight inside so fast that she must have had her own key and have been expert in the use of it.

He asked the outfitter a leading question, and the man grinned.

"All the street is full of girls, and some is, and some ain't. Daytime there's dozens workin' in sewin' ships, makin' awnin's and stuff. Night time some of 'em as has homes goes to 'em; some stays out and makes a bit overtime, cap. Ain't chasin' no sailortown fluff yerself, are ye? I can give you addresses of better'n that."

"I saw a man I want, along with a girl down the street. If I could find her I'd find him, likely," Orson returned smoothly. Then he turned to the real business of his visit; the stealing of Mr. Martin from easy old Captain Abbott

"HE'S only half baked, but he knows the *Kestrel* and I'll trust him," Orson stated.

"Dunno how you're going to get him, cap." The outfitter scratched his head. With other ship masters he would have driven a shrewd dicker; he was afraid of Orson. Orson had a habit of getting what he wanted. But the *Huntress* was sailing on the next morning's tide, her crew all aboard, and the last man able to get shore leave at that late hour was the mate. This was explained to Orson.

"You've got to get him," the skipper insisted. "There ain't another mate in 'Frisco who'll go in the *Kestrel* with me. Besides, I want Martin. Can you get another mate for Abbott in an hour?"

"I can get six mates for any ship out o' 'Frisco except yours," grinned the outfitter; and Orson took no offense.

"Then get one. Have him ready with his dunnage here in the store. I'm going to swear out a warrant for thieving against Martin and have him pinched."

The man stared after the skipper as he bustled out of the street. But he grinned, shook his head admiringly, and got busy with the telephone.

At dawn the next morning the *Huntress* got her anchor and went to sea. The song of her crew at the windlass awakened Val Orson. As she swam by the *Kestrel's* berth in tow of a tug, with her lower topsails set and her upper topsails going aloft jerkily. Orson has his telescope upon the stout figure of decent old Captain Abbott, and would see nothing very much amiss. Swinging the glass to the *Huntress's* forecastle head, Orson saw a brisk young mate conning the work of getting the anchor aboard and setting the fore topsail; and there was no reason, forward or aft, aboard the *Huntress* to cause Val Orson to reproach himself for having stolen her last chief mate.

The cook served breakfast an hour early, having been frightened out of his wits by the skipper's early rising. And Orson had but just finished the meal, licking his lips with relish, when a policeman came aboard from the dock and asked for him. The mill workers were swarming to the time-clocks; the loading foreman was talking to the superintendent about the apparent slackness of the *Kestrel's* skipper in getting ready, and Orson was being told that Martin lay in jail, waiting to be charged with stealing, and furiously denying any theft. Orson's presence was needed at once.

Nonchalantly waving a hand at the superintendent, who shouted that he wanted to speak to him, and shouting back the promise that he would be ready to load in an hour, Val Orson jumped into a cab behind the mill and drove police stationward with a broad grin on his face. He saw the officer at the police station, and coolly informed him that he had found the article he believed had been stolen by Martin. Martin was brought out, and what he omitted to say to Orson was not at the time in human vocabulary. Orson heard it all with a saddened expression. Then he took the arm of Mr. Martin.

"It was that little floosey, Mr. Martin," he said, soothingly. "It's a damned shame. But come back and take your old berth in the *Kestrel*. It's the least I can do to make it up to you. Come right aboard, Mister. We're all ready to load. You won't lose a day's pay. Perhaps you'll like it as well."

Thus the *Kestrel* secured her mate and received her cargo. A good cook and steward were aboard. Mr. Martin was full fed and contented, he was really rather glad that he had missed the *Huntress* after all, for Captain Abbott was a fatherly old sort who might speak softly to his mate, but would never shed lustre on anybody by breaking records with his ship.

CAPTAIN ORSON spent hours along the waterfront. At the outfitter's store he grew to be a nuisance; but nobody dared tell him that. One morning he again saw the Greek sailor with the little brown woman, and the man was drunk, the woman performing a wild native dance in the street. Both ran out of sight when a policeman started after them; and Orson laughed; he no longer had any interest in the brown woman. As for the Greek sailor, he was non-existent.

But that new face that had flashed across the skipper's view remained elusive. Describe her as he might, Orson could find nobody who could identify the girl. After three days, when he had exhausted every possible source of information, he was convinced that she was no waterside hussy at least; or if she was she was a deep one, and no indiscreet fly-by-night trollop.

When the ship was within two days of completing loading, and it became necessary to round up a crew, other matters took all of the skipper's waking time, and he had to give up the search for that new face. He expected trouble in securing a crew. That was a part of his troublous life. At the various places where men were usually to be got, he expected to find nobody. And for once in his life was surprised. At the store of the outfitter he found two men who took his breath away for an instant with the sheer quality of them.

"What's wrong with 'em?" he demanded of the outfitter, while staring rudely at the young fellows who seemed to be regarding him curiously.

"Ain't they good men?" the man grinned, shoving forward some papers for Orson to see. "They just paid off a big windjammer from Kobe. They've heard so much about you and the *Kestrel* they don't even want shore leave if they can ship with you."

"We're both able seamen, sir," one of the healthy youngsters put in. "We'd like a chance in the *Kestrel*."

Orson appeared unable to believe it. He glanced at the outfitter, who grinned queerly. The youngsters were upright and self reliant, meeting his fierce scrutiny frankly. They were rather like young college men out for sport than able seamen from a deepwaterman seeking a new ship before they had lost their last sea-legs.

"They told me they'd heard the *Kestrel* was a blood boat and you were a killer, and wanted to look," the outfitter remarked, fearful that Orson was going to refuse these men, badly though he needed them. The outfitter needed his fee. The skipper's eyes flashed. Men like that were rare. He liked to have such as they out at sea, where he could make their souls writhe and watch the sport. He nodded curtly.

"Sign on tomorrow morning," he said. Then, leaving his order for a complete crew, he hurried out on his other errands, and outside the door of the store ran hard against the new face he had been seeking. The girl dropped some parcels, and looked frightened until Orson picked them up and smiled down at her. She tried to avoid his overbold gaze, but he was speaking to her as he piled her bundles in her arms, and she was forced to look up. Then he saw that she had the sun browned look of a country girl; the sun browned look and the mildly bovine expression of a simple soul whose healthy young body had been developed rather more rapidly than her mentality. Briefly, she was a simple wench from the open fields or the farm, transplanted to the grimmest part of the city and not yet comfortable in the new environment.

"Beg pardon, missy, I hope I didn't hurt you," smiled Orson. He was dusting off a parcel with one hand while holding her arm with the other, leading her in the direction in which she had been going when he collided with her. "Let me carry some of these things. Where do you live?"

He was keenly scanning her as he talked; and he saw that she was free limbed and lithe, young and full breasted, mature in a womanly way, and not over intelligent. She seemed frightened and flattered at the same time; as if somebody had told her to beware of strange men, but Orson rather over-rode her fears.

"I work down here, sir," she said shyly. "I can take the things now, thank you sir."

He looked up at the house she had stopped before. It was a boarding-house.

"I'm dining room girl," she smiled simply.

"You're a very pretty girl," he said, laying the last parcel on the heap in her arms and pinching her red cheek softly. "Can you get out tonight and go to a show with me? I'm a stranger in the city, too. I'm a sailor."

"Oh, I can't get out at night, sir," she simpered. "Besides, I've been warned against sailors. I got to go. There's the madam. Thanks for helping me."

Orson stood for a moment watching the place, and the smile of the hunter hovered about his lips. Taking a turn about the block, he came back from the opposite direction and walked directly up to the door of the house and rang the bell. A sharp-faced old woman opened the door, and her beady eyes swept over him from top to toe in a lightning flash.

"I want room and board, ma'am," he announced, with his wallet already in hand.

"No room," she snapped, yet gazed lingeringly at the wallet.

"You can board me, can't you?" he persisted. "I don't care about a room so much. I have to eat near my work, and that's near here."

The lady thought that could be managed; and five minutes later Val Orson was hurrying back to the ship to tell Mr. Martin about the crew prospects, and also to dress himself all over again with greater care so that he might appear at table in his new boarding house to the best advantage.

At noontime he found out her name was Nancy Prouse. When she served his coffee, he squeezed her hand. At supper another girl, greasy from the kitchen, served the table; and the landlady asked him casually how long he expected to eat there.

Val Orson laughed and left. But he waited in the street until midnight, scarcely believing until then that the girl had told him the truth when she said she did not come out at night.

WHEN another day appeared the *Kestrel's* lading was complete; and Val Orson forgot about women in the sharper battle of wits that was precipitated in securing his crew. It was no use sending Martin out. Martin could get men until he named the ship. So, leaving him to choose a second mate, stating as the only requirement that the junior officer must have brawn though lacking brains, Orson went to the crimps for men. Of Mr. Martin he was assured. The mate might have some of the caution of a married man at sea, but it did not extend to his handling of men. Mr. Martin was a real chief mate at least; no crew scared him easily.

But even the crimps were not enthusiastic. At one place Orson found six men just out of jail. One was an ex-parson, the toughest of the lot. Money was left with that crimp to keep the six men stupefied until the boat was ready for them. No crew would be shipped until the *Kestrel* had hauled out to her anchor to wait for the tug. It was unsafe to put crews aboard of hell-ships at the dock while conscious.

By nightfall of the evening before sailing day, the *Kestrel* still lacked men, and Orson took his new second mate ashore after the ship was anchored, to round up the men he lacked. The second mate was a beefy young giant called Ringlin, and was young enough to have decided that Val Orson did not look very formidable. He rather fancied himself. And when, after an hour of rounding up sailortown, the launch that had been hired to cart the men out to the ship contained all the men required except one, mainly through the efforts of Ringlin, Orson was getting hot under the collar from the youth's self praise.

"You talk a bit windy, Mister Ringlin. Wait 'til you're at sea," he said sharply, and more than one meaning might be read in to the advice. Ringlin was very young.

"I never saw the man I couldn't handle, Cap'n Orson, at sea or shore," the second mate retorted. Orson grunted. They were at the launch landing again, and had almost decided to put off a man short rather than risk losing some of the men in the boat who might come to life at any moment. The waterside was deserted. If a policeman had shown himself there might have been one more mysterious disappearance chronicled in the morning papers. But not even a night prowler appeared, although the hour was not yet late. There was a fog drifting in over the Bay and it had a chill in it which sent folks to cover unless they had business outside.

Just when Orson was about to step into the boat, to leave the land for many a long day, he caught a fleeting glimpse of a shadowy figure lurking in the vague space behind the mill. He started toward it, for a man was a man when a clipper was bound to sea. Then he made out two shapes, and Ringlin joined him. Together they walked rapidly to the corner of the mill, around which the two figures had dodged; and swiftly the bigger of the two leaped upon Orson with a snarl and a flash of steel just as Ringlin plunged forward and grabbed the smaller figure.

It was dark. But even while trying to parry a vicious knife stroke aimed at his throat, Orson recognized the Greek sailor he had seen several times along with the Malay woman. The knife pricked him; but his powerful fingers had caught the stabbing hand, his free hand was already at the bent elbow, exerting a terrible twisting pressure. A shriek and a yell came out of the mist beyond the mill building, and at the moment when the Greek tumbled over cursing and groaning with the agony of a broken arm, Mr. Ringlin blundered forward holding a wounded hand and muttering darkly.

"It was a hellcat of a nigger gal! She bit me!" he grumbled, not quite as cocksure as he had been. Orson let go the Greek and kicked him contemptuously on the ground.

"Here's the man we want. Chuck him into the boat. I'll mend his arm at sea, and then teach him a few knife tricks."

BIDDING the second mate haul off shore in the boat and wait for him, Orson strode off toward the street of the boarding-house; for the encounter had reminded him of women, and he realized with something of a shock that he had almost gone to sea leaving behind him a girl who had spurned his rapid fire love-making.

How he was to reach the girl he had little idea. The old dragon seemed well able to protect her maids. But as a first step toward the desired end the skipper boldly knocked at the front door and declared to the old lady that he had left some valuable papers on the table at lunch on the day he ate there. Knowledge of any such thing was strenuously denied. He asked to see Nancy Prouse. He made his statements with such stern gravity that the landlady had no thought of opposing his inquiry.

"You'll have to see her in the morning," she said.

"But I'm going to sea in the morning!" he returned.

"Then you must wait until she comes back. She's gone to the movies with the kitchen-maid."

"You'll lose her, letting her run loose like that," Orson laughed softly. "She told me you never let her go out nights."

"I don't, with men!" the old girl snapped. "Have a seat."

"Thanks. I'll wait outside. It's fresher."

Chuckling over his good luck, Val Orson stood in the drifting mist watching the street with sea sharpened vision. He remembered that kitchen-maid. She had served the last meal he ate in the house, and had given a greasy, come-hither grin when he gave her a quarter tip.

And when the girls suddenly appeared, hurrying home, and he accosted them, it was to the kitchen-maid he addressed himself.

"I've been to the house, to see about some papers I left on the table when I ate there. The old lady told me to wait and see you girls. I'll go in with you. Here, wait a minute." As if on an impulse, he took some money from his pocket, and held out a dollar. "Before we go in, run down the street and buy some ice-cream for yourselves. You go," he thrust the money at the kitchen-maid. "You know the ropes best. And I want to say something to Nancy."

The money was taken and the girl was away in a twinkling, before Nancy had time to think. Anyhow, she could come to no harm there almost in front of the house. She simpered a little when Orson leaned over and whispered in her ear. Then, far swifter than she had believed a human being could move, Orson stooped, picked up her coat hem and dragged it over her head, and gathered her into his arms like a baby.

Out of the fog by the mill Mr. Ringlin heard a sharp hail; and when he backed the launch to the steps Val Orson stepped into it like a conqueror, bearing his kicking bundle in his arms amd offering no word except the command to get out to the ship.

CHAPTER VI

SEAWARD

HALF way out to the ship the skipper halted the launch hearing the noise of another launch in the fog. Farther away there came at intervals the sonorous booming of ferry steamers. Now and then an anchored sailing ship clattered her bell. Orson could distinguish the *Kestrel's* bell among all the rest; it had a tingling, half tremulous note, like the cry of the kestrel at mating time.

There seemed to be no reason for uneasiness. The launch owner, who drove many a trip between ship and shore at a rate which paid for his vocal discretion, stopped as ordered, started when told, saw nothing, heard nothing, except those things necessary for the safe navigation of his launch, and sat at the wheel and controls of his boat like an image. He had seen nothing to remark about in the groaning Greek with the broken arm; or the half score stupefied men who had already shown signs of coming to life out of the drugged liquor stupor that had won them to the *Kestrel's* brood. What Orson had enveloped in the bundle he carried was not hard to guess; but even a kicking woman was nothing to be fussy about when a ship was going to sea.

"Go ahead slow," Orson commanded when the other launch's exhaust had died away in the distance. Near the *Kestrel* the skipper ordered another halt. Another launch was heard speeding out from the shore. Lying motionless in the fog, Orson listened keenly, for he had lived many a year in a storm center formed of hostile men and the fruit of their hostility. Every crew he carried home was a potential mess of trouble. Experience had taught him that such trouble was just as well taken care of at its inception, by his methods, as by waiting through the tedious process of legal inquiry. Strangely, he only thought of possible trouble now as due to his carrying off of the Greek. He had detected the antipathy of the Greek consular agent who drank his Java wine. And knowing the little brown Malay woman better than anybody else knew her, with all due regard to the smug mission emissary he had dumped overboard, Orson believed that she had perhaps set the police on his trail after seeing him hurl the broken armed Greek sailorman into the launch.

There was no doubt this time. The launch from shoreward sped past, and in the direction of the *Kestrel's* tremulous bell. It stopped there. Orson sat all tensed like a hawk about to cast, and when the callow second mate opened his mouth to say something vacuous his utterance was shut off by a word so crisply shot at him as to make his wide ears tingle. The *Kestrel's* bell clattered out again, five seconds of musical clangor, and it was so near that the sounds of the speeding launch suddenly coming to a halt against her side were heard in the motionless launch which carried Orson's miscellaneous crew.

For five full minutes the fog smothered the scene, and muted the voices in Orson's boat. Then from the *Kestrel* there was heard Mr. Martin's irritable voice raised in vehement protest.

"I tell you Captain Orson is ashore! We sail on the morning tide. There's no woman aboard, and I hope to God there ain't goin' to be."

Sounds of a launch starting shattered the foggy silence. Abruptly through the murk a fleeting shape appeared. The Greek sailor uttered a yell, which Orson only partially stopped. Then a moment of dire silence when that Greek's life hung in the balance. The launch from the ship sped on. The Greek's cry had been overborne by the noise of the exhaust.

"Start her up!" gritted Orson then, and the hired boatman sent his craft alongside the gangway with a gladsome bang. Police examinations meant little, many times; but nobody invited them.

While the cook, the steward, and the two youngsters who had shipped to test the caliber of a hell ship master, swayed aboard the launch's half conscious freight, Mr. Martin apprised Orson of a serious charge that had been made against the ship.

"They had the description of you all right, sir," Martin said with the least possible note of satisfaction in his tone. "Said you picked up a girl and run her to your boat. Good job you wasn't aboard. They'd have held up the ship. They'll do it yet if they don't find that girl. They know your character, sir."

Orson grinned. In the darkness the men were hauling in over the rail bundle after bundle of muttering humanity. The Greek could not climb the Jacob's ladder unaided, and a rope was put about him. Orson had left the muffled girl on the seat with a piece of line around her, telling the launchman to hitch on the tackle when it came his way. As Martin finished telling him his doleful tale, the bundle which was Nancy Prouse came up over the rail and was swung inboard. Then Orson moved.

Gathering the girl into his arms regardless of which end came uppermost, he strode up the poop ladder with her, barking out his orders as he went.

"Kick life into enough hands to get the anchor and we'll pull out now on the ebb," he said. Mr. Martin stared into the darkness, but there was no after remark. He knew Orson. He had no particular love for weird stunts, such as sailing to sea in a thick fog with little wind; but there was no argument fit to oppose to an order uttered by such a super seaman as the man who had driven the old *Kestrel* home to beat a record, and Mr. Martin turned abruptly upon young Mr. Ringlin, bidding him stir the hands to life.

Orson bore his struggling burden to his stateroom and bundled it into the bed. There was a faint glow in the room from the swinging lamp over the saloon table, and by it he untangled the clothes from the girl's head. He laughed at her frightened face, and pinched her cheeks; she panted, and her eyes stared up at him in terror.

"Don't be scared, Nancy," he told her, while she shrank from his touch, shivering like a frightened puppy. "You're my sweetie for this voyage. You'll like me when you get used to me. All girls do."

HE LEFT her, locking the door on her, and hurried on deck to take his ship to sea. Tom Godwin and Ed Norris, the young daredevils who had shipped to test the toughness of Orson, were aloft casting off the gaskets. They were the only members of the *Kestrel's* crew fit to go aloft. The rest carried a stupendous load; for no ordinary state of drunkenness ever incapacitated a deep waterman from blundering aloft if driven there. Mr. Martin profanely herded a doleful crew of staggering men to the windlass, putting their hands to the brakes, making them heave their weight at least by dint of fist and foot. Ringlin, the cocksure second mate, not quite so boisterously cocksure since that experience behind the mill, picked out the gear for getting the topsails set and put it into the hopeless hands of other doleful creatures who were fit for nothing but sleep.

Orson stood aft, listening intently. He had ordered the stopping of the fog bell; and to an inquiry concerning sailing lights he returned a curt negative answer. The laborious click-click of the windlass as the chain crept in was like rifle fire on the foggy air. Orson knew it could be heard half a mile away. He heard the exhaust of motor-boats, and the whistles of steam vessels creeping across the blind bay. A man upon the fore lower topsail yard sang out that his sail was ready for sheeting home and Orson barked back savagely:

"—— damn you for a noisy swine! Come down and report your sail loose!"

There were six jailbirds among the sullen crowd with the second mate; and among the six was the dissolute ex-clergyman. He was, if possible, drunker than the rest, but carried his liquor as it was once said a gentleman carried it. He kept it inside him, and did not fall down. He stepped out from the gang with a ludicrous gravity, and pointed aft at the skipper.

"You are a bad man, captain. Your words reveal an evil soul. I will wrestle with the Lord for your salvation when we have sat these hell blasted tops'ls."

Orson laughed. It was easy to identify that man. But for the present there was altogether too much delay in getting the ship to sea, and motor-boats were becoming too noisy. Incapable though the crew might be, sheer weight dragged in the cable slack, and the anchor had not been down long enough to be deeply buried. A smart round of heaving would break it out, and getting it on board was something that could be done at leisure while the ship sailed out. Orson stepped to the head of the poop ladder impatiently. The click of the windlass was so slow and regular that it sounded out across the misty night startlingly clear. It was impossible that denizens of the shore front could long remain oblivious of the fact that a ship was going to sea in a fog so thick that one street light could not be seen from another. With a police launch already on the watch, moments were precious. And as the skipper paused, unwilling to leave the poop yet, while so much depended upon the alertness of the watch he kept, a deep throated steam siren boomed out so close to the ship that he could hear the crackling of the steam. At the same time he heard the swish of parted water at the stem of a great ocean liner at half speed. And the fog was suddenly yellow; then the glow divided itself for an instant into three rows of golden port holes ablaze with light.

THE tremendous disturbance of the water made the old *Kestrel* sway gently. She heaved, and her lifting bow dragged the anchor from the mud as the golden ports faded into a glow, and the glow vanished again in the murky gray. There was a breeze, which broke up the fog into swirls and drove it in damp masses athwart the decks, saturating the miserable wretches at the brakes and topsail gear. Out of the fast moving mists that had been disturbed by the steamer's passing, came excited voices, and Orson knew that the officer on that steamer's bridge had received such a shock in the near collision that they must surely report it as soon as the shore boat took their lines.

Reaching the main deck in two jumps he seized Ringlin by the arm.

"Take your gang and help rattle in that cable lively. Rouse out that Greek with the broken arm. He can steer. —— damn him. Send him aft. Dig out the steward too. Never mind making sail. Get the ship free o' the bottom, and we'll make sail as we drift."

Again Orson listened over the shoreward rail. The liner was anchoring for the night. Her cable crashed out, and her engine room telegraph could be heard. Soon there sounded the staccato barking of several motor-boats around her. Soon there would be one of those motor boats heading out toward the *Kestrel* again. Men stumbled on to the forecastle head to join the windlass gang; and the cable began to come in faster under the combined drive of both mates. The Greek sailor shambled past Orson, stepping wide of him, watching him fearfully. The Greek was sober, and could estimate very closely the measure of his own security.

"Go to the wheel!" Orson snarled, and walked aft behind the man, who reached the poop on the run, his broken arm swinging agonizingly by his side.

Down below the skipper dragged the steward from his bed and drove him on deck. He tried the door of his own stateroom, listening for sounds inside. There was no sound. Val Orson felt satisfied that Nancy Prouse had accepted the situation, and was no doubt sleeping peacefully.

Presently a man ran barefooted from forward, and Orson, emerging from below, met him at the ladder. It was Norris.

"Anchor's away, sir," the man reported quietly, and waited for orders. Orson answered as quietly:

"Tell Mr. Martin to run it up to the hawse pipe and make sail. Get the inner jib set, and haul the sheet down to port to help her around."

Norris returned forward with a conviction that of all the tough blood boat skippers, Cap Orson was the softest. A Greek helmsman kept silent behind clenched teeth, and had a different opinion. Forward to the fog the rattle of jib hanks and the fluttering of canvas preceded the slow swinging of the ship's head as the sail was hoisted and backed. Then the backed foretopsail caught the breeze, and the ship turned faster. In five minutes the *Kestrel* was moving slowly through the water, and in five more her foreyards were hauled around to catch the fair slant that blew to seaward.

Slowly she moved; faster as each sail was added and trimmed. Orson stood close beside the Greek; but that was never necessary as a safeguard against treachery. The Greek had much of the wisdom of his country's classic sages. He might contemplate reprisal; but not with a broken arm; nor did he propose to risk getting another arm broken. He obeyed orders with close precision, and Orson speedily realized that fact. It gave him more time to listen for signs which might portend trouble.

SOON they came, those signs. Out of the shoreward fog came the angry exhaust of a speeding launch; soon a peremptory hail shot out at the ship; though the *Kestrel* bore no lights, nor made a sound other than the creaking of her gear and the soft lapping of gently tumbling waters under her counter, that launch was steered by somebody with an uncanny sense of perception. Nobody answered the hail; and then the motor-boat stopped, right at the spot where the ship's anchor had but recently been raised. The throttled engine could be heard, gradually receding in distance as the launch circled the spot; then the exhaust started firing again, and the sounds increased, as if somebody had heard the slight sounds of the *Kestrel's* flight and was directing the pursuit.

"Can you feel the wind on your face?" Orson murmured in the ear of the Greek. And at the muttered affirmative. "Then steady as she goes, and watch yer steering!"

Gathering up a coil of small line from the mizzen pinrail, the skipper leaned over the side and peered into the sternward darkness. Voices could now be heard above the rush of the motor-boat; and very soon that peremptory hail rang out once more. "*Kestrel* ahoy! In the name o' the law, stop!"

Orson smothered a curse; but there was utter good humor and willingness to oblige in his voice when he answered;

"Is that a police boat? Come alongside and I'll give ye a line. Don't care to anchor right here unless I have to. Stand by to catch this line."

The motor-boat shot out of the fog and ranged alongside. Orson threw his line, and somebody caught it. Then the motor was shut off, and the line tautened as it took the boat's weight and began to tow it. The old *Kestrel* was beginning to move subtly fast, ghosting through the smooth water like a yacht. Orson gripped the steward, sneaking past to go below.

"Run for'ard and tell the mate to set the fore and main courses and t'gallants'ls, and *to take no notice o' what I yell!*"

As soon as the frightened steward had gone the skipper bawled loudly:

"Take in the upper topsails, Mister Martin. Look alive. And have all hands mustered on deck. The police are here after somebody. Bring aft that jailbird parson. Doubtless it's him."

The gear began to squeal and thunder as the heavy courses fell and were sheeted home. The men in the launch hauled up on the line the skipper had thrown, while he, at the rail above them, begged them to be patient while he got a ladder rigged for them. Then, when the ship moved still faster under the added sail, he watched the launch until she sheered a bit wide of the dark hull, and swiftly cast loose and threw into it the inboard end of the line she towed with.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen! I'll back my mainyards for you!" roared Orson as the launch vanished in the gloom again and the old *Kestrel* sped on.

Voices seemed to be raised excitedly in the launch. It was some minutes before the noise of her exhaust was heard. By which time the *Kestrel* had gathered speed which mocked at the efforts of the launch to overtake her. That exhaust never got any nearer. Voices which threatened many things, dwindled away on the night.

Orson gave the helmsmen a course which would carry the ship wide of the direction in which she would be sought, then left the deck in charge of Mr. Martin and went below. He had almost forgotten his lovebird imprisoned down there in his cage; but the police boat reminded him, and he unlocked his stateroom door with a mild sort of wonder how he would find Nancy Prouse.

At first there seemed to be a queer feeling in the atmosphere of the little apartment. He had ordered the cabin lights to be put out. Now he took a flashlight from his pocket and switched in on; and his heart gave a leap of amazement. Nancy Prouse had managed to solve the mystery of the port hole. She had opened the circular window, and was now stuck midway of the opening, her hips alone having prevented her completing her exit. Orson had not expected that much spirit in her. He grinned with much relish as he coolly hauled her back inside.

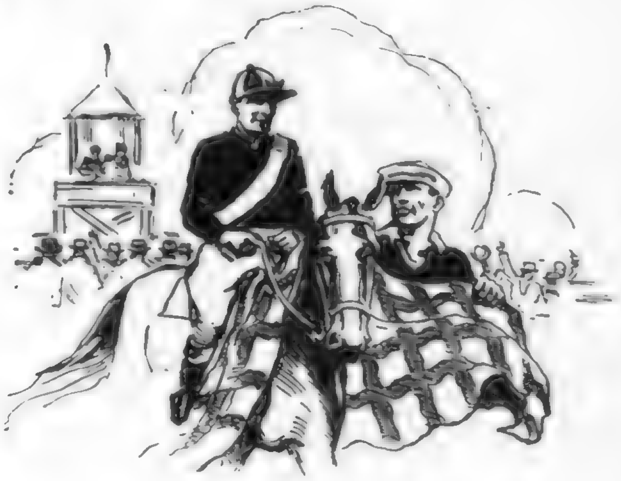
"Well, if you ain't a plucky wench!" he exclaimed, sitting down on the settee and regarding her curiously.

To be continued in the next chapters with Val Orson's mad ambition that drives his crew to despair and mutiny.

They's ALWAYS Thoroughbreds

By

Meigs O. Frost



He Hadn't Ridden in Seventeen Years but—

THE young man's hair was red, Shorty noticed casually as he took his seat in the grandstand. Not a flaming red like Shorty's own. But a crisp, pleasant, sandy red. Also his eyes were gray and agreeable. And while his jaw was not craggy, still it was the kind of a jaw that went with making up your own mind.

And the girl with him—she was a five-alarm ball of fire. That's the way Shorty put it to himself. Class in every line, from hair of shingled gold to slim dark satin pumps.

They weren't race-track regulars. Shorty was sure of that from the first few words he overheard after he slipped into his seat in front of them. They didn't use the strange little tricks of phrase that mark those who live apart from a humdrum world; apart in that curious realm of the turf; those little twists of speech that bear the label of stable and track as plainly as a certain flatness of shoe reveals the policeman who pounds a beat.

The man was troubled. That much was clear. More troubled than the girl. That, their conversation showed. For they were talking with a peculiar freedom that marks those accustomed to the privacy of crowds. And Shorty, to whom all the world was a book to be studied eagerly, above and beyond his own favorite chapter on the turf, was mentally alert from the first few fragments of their talk that drifted to his ears.

They were in love, Shorty was sure. He grinned amiably, approvingly, as he confirmed it in his own mind. Certain phrases they repeated over and over again with the reiteration possible only to those in love. The newness of being together seemed untarnishable to them.

"It was just wonderful for you to get that hospital appointment, Don. And it was simply gorgeous of you to be able to get away from the hospital and join us in New Orleans. I didn't dream you'd be able—"

"I *had* to come, Jean. When I found your folks were taking you down here for the races and the Carnival, I simply *had* to come. I knew it meant a show-down, then. I'd put it off too long, anyway."

"You and that mysterious something

you're always hinting! One would think you'd been hiding a crime!"

"People's ideas of crime differ. Your father and mother think I'm a social crime—and maybe they're right."

"You're too old to be spanked. But I'd like to *pound* you!"

"I'd love you to pound me. I deserve a pounding for ever coming near you, anyway."

"Oh, thanks! That *is* a compliment!" Scornfully and spiritedly from her.

"You *know* I didn't mean *it* that way!" Wretchedly from him.

Evidently this was a gloomy young gentleman who liked to torture himself, Shorty noted silently. But even flagellants have their rewards. This one's came in a murmured reproachful "Don!" of a tone no type can duplicate. And a husky-throated "Jean!" answered it.

"Holy catfish!" breathed Shorty. This was better than a stage-box seat.

But what the devil was the matter with the poor mutt? Shorty interrogated himself mildly. Didn't he have his girl with him? Wasn't the afternoon young yet? Wasn't the sun shining? Wasn't the Louisiana Jockey Club winter meet in mid-swing with the fair grounds track never better and the prettiest bunch of thoroughbreds you ever saw out there in the stables? Tell the world—

Far away a bugle's silver throat wove a tapestry of melody in the soft, silken air. A sudden exclamation from the girl cut joyously through the dismal dialogue behind him.

"Oh, Don! Isn't it all lovely! Let's forget all this mysterious show-down you've been agonizing about, till you get ready to talk about it. Did you ever see such a picture?"

She was right, conceded Shorty. He was ready to enjoy such a picture, too. His was the bland serenity of the hustler whose pick had won in the second, with a twenty-dollar ticket pinned right on her lily-white nose. Fifty-seven to one had been her price, even in the modified mutuels, with a bunch of sucker players running hog-wild on a three-legged favorite that didn't have a chance to run third in a seven-horse field. Pinned in Shorty's inside coat pocket was more than a thousand dollars in lovely greenbacks. More than a "grand" all at once—the hustler's dream of heaven. That's why Shorty was a gentleman in the grandstand. Everything was lovely to him, just now, too.

HE LOOKED out over the scene that had brought the exclamation from the girl. They were leading them out for the fourth. Massed in front of the grandstand were thousands of heads, close-packed, surging across the lawn like waves of the sea, to be checked at the white-washed fence. Beyond the fence the stretch was like a soft, brown ribbon, stippled with hoof-tracks, unrolled against the green velvet of the infield. Out in the center of the oval rose the great, towering spread of the live-oaks with their whitewashed trunks.

Green of the grass, gray of the club-house walls, red tile of the club-house roof, blue Louisiana sky and golden Louisiana sunlight over it all, bathing everything in a sort of shimmery glory. Shorty didn't phrase it that way. But he felt it that way. His was no mean realm—this realm of the turf. Of the glory that had made men call it the sport of kings centuries ago, some vestige remained.

"Pity a layout like that's gotta have its rats!" Shorty said to himself. For his heart was hot at injustice newly learned. Injustice that not even the feel of that "grand" in his inside pocket could wholly salve.

Leading them out for the fourth. The bugle's "Boots and Saddles" had sounded from the paddock. Down the paddock path they came; out on the track. Up toward the judges' stand they moved in the classic "Parade to the Post." Jockeys' silks agleam above the gleaming coats of their mounts. Thoroughbreds stepping proudly with daintily lifted hooves. Thoroughbreds nervous and skittish, bodies curved, advancing sideways, crab-wise.

"Isn't he quaint!" said the girl behind Shorty. "Look, Don. Out there in front. In the red hunting coat."

Shorty looked, too. Just as though it was new to him. Just as though that figure in the red coat wasn't the sign and symbol of the injustice at which Shorty's heart was hot. Just as though he didn't know more about that red-coated figure than the girl behind him could ever possibly know, he thought to himself.

On a staid fat calico pony rode the parade leader. He was clad in the picturesque costume of an English master of foxhounds. Red coat, white breeches, shining boots, tight peaked black velvet cap and riding crop. The outfit to which old Alexander Fergusson—old Red-Coat Fergusson—old Pop Fergusson—had clung for seventeen years as his last visible grip on the turf he loved, just as a sailor caught in the sweep of some great irresistible wave would clutch and cling to any loose end of rope that kept him from being swept overboard.

It should have been Red-Coat Fergusson riding there, leading the parade up to salute the judges before the horses faced the barrier, Shorty knew. It should have been. But it wasn't. That was Larry Winston in the M. F. H. costume. Larry, lobby-gow, pussy-footer to the Big Feller who pulled the strings behind the scenes of racing as he pulled them in the politics of his city and his state. The Big Feller who specialized in getting men jobs and putting men out of jobs. The bird who by strange coincidence had got old Red-Coat Fergusson fired and Larry Winston put in his place after Pop Fergusson, honest from his heart out, keen of observing Scotch eye, had torn open one dirty track scandal out of which two jockeys had been set down for life—and one of them the jockey who rode many a mount that was sent in to bring home the bacon with a wad of the Big Feller's money tied to its tail.

Yes, Shorty told himself, he could tell that jane a lot she never dreamed about that quaint red-coated figure out there in front. What did she know about figures like the Big Feller looming in the background of all this glory. The "sport of kings" did have its rats. The worst ones, though, were the ones who didn't look like rats. They wore hundred and fifty dollar suits of clothes. They rode behind chauffeurs. They lived in hotel suites. They pretended a bluff honesty. They passed as sportsmen and gentlemen. Damn 'em, anyway.

INTO the seat beside him slipped a wiry figure, jabbing him amicably in the ribs with a sharp elbow. Shorty looked around and grinned in recognition. The Gutta Percha Kid. The harder they slammed him, the higher he bounced. From his face it was evident he was bouncing high, now.

" 'Lo, Shorty. Ain't you playin' 'em from the ground today?"

" 'Lo, Kid. Nope. Ain't playin' 'em no more this afternoon. Had Blaze in the second. Twenty on her nose. Fifty-seven to one. Givin' the roll a rest 'til tomorrow. What you got?"

"I got me a three-star special comin' in on the chin-strap in this fourth, all right. Too late to do you any good, though, Shorty, even if you weren't through for the day. You couldn't get a ticket on this before the post-bell rings."

"I should worry. What's your three-star special?"

The Gutta Percha Kid looked out to where the field was passing the judges' stand, and heading for the lowered barrier.

"Devastation," he said. "Notice who's up?"

The distance was too great to recognize a face beneath the jockey's peaked cap. Idly, Shorty glanced at his program. There, across from Devastation's name, was the name of the jockey, Fergusson.

"Fergusson?" Shorty's forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. "I don't place any jock with that monaker, Kid. Been asleep at the switch, I guess. Ridin' Devastation for Sam Holton? Who is he, Kid?"

The Gutta Percha Kid chuckled.

"Funny what a difference a few clothes make," he said. "You been seein' that baby for years, leadin' the parade."

"I'm a son of a bum!"

Shorty reached for his binoculars, tore them out of their leather case, and focused them on the rider of that Devastation horse. His voice rose a little with excitement.

"Dawg my cats, Kid! You're right! Old Pop Fergusson ridin' for Sam Holton! Why, that old boy's forty-six if he's a day! He hasn't forked a pig-skin in seventeen years. What's the low-down?"

"Plenty low-down, Shorty. Pop's ridin' for revenge. And believe you me, he may be old, but he's a ridin' fool. Ever since the Big Feller had him turfed out of that parade leader job, he's been workin' round Sam Holton's stables. I thought it was just a charity job to give Pop cakes and coffee and a place to sleep. Pop needed anything he could get. Had a boy in college somewhere, I hear. Guess it was some of Sam Holton's quiet charity at first. Then I was out here early one morning ahead of the clockers, even. I saw Pop givin' Devastation some early workouts. Mighty early. You know all about that Devastation horse don't you?"

“Sure,” said Shorty. “Seven years old. Fine horse, but he sulks. Sam never could get anybody to cure him of that sulkin’!”

“Well,” grinned the Gutta Percha Kid, “Pop’s cured him. I was surprised stiff when I saw the old boy taking a shower over at the stables, the other morning. Got arms and a chest like a prize-fighter on him. He ain’t been lettin’ himself get fat, leadin’ the parade all these years. He’s all set to grab himself off a win today if he breaks a neck doing it.”

“Why today, specially?”

“The Big Feller thinks he’s cooked up something pretty good on Sylvanus. He and his inside crowd are goin’ down on Sylvanus heavy, telegraphing the Chicago books. They ain’t playin’ a dollar here on the mutuels. If it’s the last thing Pop does, he wants to kick over that apple cart. And Shorty, I been clockin’ Devastation and Sylvanus, and I just put down my last fifty iron men that he can do it. I’d hope he does it anyway if I didn’t have a cent down, after that dirty double cross the Big Feller pulled on him for lettin’ fresh air in on that fixing mess when they set down Herman and Feraci.”

Behind Shorty and the Kid as the Kid’s tale unfolded, sat two auditors. One of them was deathly white of face.

Out there in front of the grandstand the line of thoroughbreds was shifting and swirling as some of the nervous youngsters in the field kicked and pivoted skittishly while the assistant starters cursed and the crowd milled impatiently.

“Back to school for some of those babies tomorrow morning,” muttered the Gutta Percha Kid. “Funny, how some of ’em can’t face the barrier without having a fit. Look at Devastation and Pop, there. They ain’t wastin’ nothin’.”

“Yeah,” said Shorty. His eyes were focused on the scene before them. Mentally he was measuring Devastation against Sylvanus. Good horse, Devastation. If he was over that sulking. Might do it. Would he?

THE barrier flipped skyward with a twang of a bowstring released. Up from the grandstand, up from the lawn, up from the club-house terrace even, sounded the involuntary: “They’re off!”

They *were* off at last. Off to a beautiful start. Almost even was the line of velvety muzzles sweeping toward the turn. Then, out of the ruck of the field, two heads thrust forward. Focused glasses showed their numbers. Sylvanus and Devastation.

“Look at ’em! Look at ’em!” The Gutta Percha Kid was twitching with excitement. “Didn’t I tell ya’? Sylvanus from the jump! He ain’t gonna get away with it! Look at Pop crowd him!”

Then the Gutta Percha Kid went quite wholly mad. He had no monopoly of madness. Shorty, beside him, went mad too. Up to their feet they rose. The floor was not enough. Into their seats they climbed.

One of those two velvet muzzles in the vanguard of the field had thrust ahead of the other. Then it lead by a head. Then by a neck. It was Sylvanus.

“Sylvanus on top!” bellowed a brazen-lunged turfite near them. “Sylvanus on top!” Rowelled by the ten-dollar ticket in his vest pocket, that turfite sent his warchant roaring afar. “Sylvanus! He’s gonna win a mile!”

Like a steam siren shrieking above the thunder of a rumbling surf, the voice of the Gutta Percha Kid rose high and shrill as if it could reach the ears of an aged rider far out there on the track.

“Come on, you Pop Fergusson! Come on, you Devastation! Sylvanus hell! Show them dirty rats you ain’t down and out yet! Learn them bums who they been tryin’ to double cross! Come on, you Pop—come on—COME ON! ! !”

Pop Fergusson, his wiry old body hunched high, outthrust over Devastation’s withers, was coming on. If ever that Devastation horse had sulked, Pop held the secret of unkinking him. Doggedly he held his place by Sylvanus’ shoulder. They entered the half with Sylvanus leading by that same neck. The thousands were breathless. Down through the half they lunged like two mechanical horses, fixed, immovable from their relative positions. If Devastation should sulk now—

But Devastation didn’t sulk. Something in the flaming heart of the ancient rider who hadn’t forked a pigskin for seventeen years seemed communicated to the heart of that Devastation horse. Into the three-quarter they thrust. Inch by inch Devastation was lessening that length of a neck by which Sylvanus led. Now it was nose to nose, stirrup to stirrup. Two lengths behind them the rest of the field, unconsidered, strung out in the fight for third place. Back there jockeys might seek to slip in by the rail, to pocket a contender, to avoid a pocket. Nothing of that out in front. There it was the old, old duel between two horses and their riders. It was Pop Fergusson's challenge. Nobly Devastation bore him to it.

Stirrup to stirrup and eye to eye for a furlong. And that furlong told the tale. Devastation burned the heart out of his foe. At the three-quarter post all was over but the shouting.

Down the stretch Pop Fergusson thundered, high in his stirrups, all "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" blent in one. Halfway to the finish he looked around over his shoulder. The glasses focused on him revealed his grin, tight-lipped, mocking. Derisively he waved his whip in farewell at Sylvanus and his rider. Then he leaned forward to finish his task. Into the ear of that Devastation horse he crooned his chant of triumph.

"Down and out, huh! No good, huh! Ain't good enough even to lead the parade no more! Some parade we're leadin' now, huh! Come along, you Devastation baby! Show this kindergarten what the old folks can do! Who says you sulked! Teach this infants' class how to ride a horse! Lean into it, you runnin' fool!"

Devastation leaned into it. Never a falter in his thundering rush. Never a hint of sulks. Even a burst of added speed as old Pop Fergusson reached behind him with a touch of comedy and spanked his mount with his whip, as on the crest of a terrific leap he lunged under the wire.

By nearly two lengths he had won.

THERE in the grandstand the Gutta Percha Kid was doing a whirling dervish dance within the narrow confines of the seat on which he stood.

"Gangway for a race-horse!" he howled. "Gangway you double crossers! Fifteen to one! Fifty iron men on his nose! Gangway!"

He drove the breath out of Shorty's lungs with a terrific blow between the shoulder-blades and whooped with joy once more.

"Slow down, you crazy fool! Take your hoof off the gas!" implored Shorty, raising his arms to guard against another delirious attack. As he did so, his glance went to the pair behind him. The girl was flushed with excitement. The young man's face was gray. Shorty's eyes widened.

Out on the track the thoroughbreds had wheeled, checked at the finish, swung back before the judges' stand, and stood quivering as their jockeys saluted with up-flung whips before they tossed those whips to their caddies, dismounted, and started for the scales.

A smile was wreathing the face of the presiding judge as he looked down from the stand at old Pop Fergusson, the winner.

"I suppose you'll be asking for an apprentice allowance, next race!" came the official jest. And the judge, turning to a confrère, said: "Most marvelous thing I ever saw on a track. First time Pop has worn silks since he got smashed up in that spill at Saratoga seventeen years ago."

Pop grinned. From the saddle he slid, stood there a moment while his caddy unsaddled, and then, tackle on arm, stepped to the scales for the weighing-out that checked the paddock weighing-in.

Out on the track he stepped, to head back to the jockeys' quarters where lads in their 'teens, he knew, were waiting to kid and congratulate him.

And then from the grandstand and the lawn rose a sudden surge of strange sound. A pitying sound through which pierced the shrill screams of some hysterical woman still overwrought from that finish; the hoarse-throated calls of excited men.

Pop Fergusson, his face suddenly white, had stumbled for a step or two. Then he sprawled forward, prone on the soft surface of the track. There he lay with arms outflung. He did not rise.

Just behind him, Shorty heard a groan of agony. He wheeled around. It had been wrenched from the throat of the young man with the gray face.

The girl beside him looked at him wonderingly.

"Whatever is the matter?" she exclaimed. "Why, Don, you're sick!"

"You've got to wait for me here," the young man said, huskily. "I'll be back in a little while. But I've *got* to go out there and see what's the matter with him."

Like a half-back tearing through the line of a football scrimmage, he shot from his seat. Down the aisle he bored his way, down the steps, across the lawn. In his wake swirled folk astonished, angry, some cursing him as he shoved them ruthlessly aside. Just so swirl the waters in the wake of a speeding destroyer.

Something nebulous in Shorty's mind began to take form and substance. He swung around.

"If you want to get down there, we'll take you, lady," he said.

Mutely she nodded assent.

"Come on, Kid," ordered Shorty sharply. "You can cash in later on. Never mind the gravy-line now. Let's get this lady down front."

One on each side of her, they, too, bored through the crowd. Squirming, wriggling, diving under arms, they forced their way. They made it to the little gate opening in the fence surrounding the judges' stand. There a hard-faced guard sought to hold them back. Into his ear Shorty whispered a swift impassioned message. He let them through. Five seconds later they had joined the little group on the track, bunched close about old Pop Fergusson where he lay. By his side knelt the young man named Don.

Over the pair of them bent an anxious official.

"Is he dead?"

Up and down the world of the turf they knew that official as "Iron Mush" Murphy. By popular repute you could bounce railroad spikes off his face. But Shorty noticed just then that the hard old face was curiously softened; that the chill blue eyes were blurred with tears. Gameness and fighting heart they know on the turf. Before those qualities their hats are off.

"Dead?" The young man looked up from his scrutiny. "Not so you could notice it. Strain and excitement are what did this. Not that they weren't enough to kill a man of his age. Who's got—"

In through the group bored a fussy little man clutching a physician's black bag.

"Here's Doctor Fentress, the track physician," said "Iron Mush" Murphy. "He's got anything you need."

The young man rose to his feet.

"I'm Dr. Donald Fergusson of Chicago, Doctor Fentress," he said. "I don't think we need anything in your bag unless you've got the flask I was just starting to ask for when you came."

"Flask?"

Half a dozen hands reached to half a dozen hips. It was from the ornately chased silver flask of the presiding judge himself that old Pop Fergusson tasted the liquid that brought him back out of the blackness into which he had slid. Shaky still, he struggled to a sitting posture. Even shakier he was as he was helped to his feet.

"Have another," urged the presiding judge.

Pop Fergusson reached for the flask.

"I will, thanks," he said. He tilted it up. "But understand, judge, this one isn't for medicinal purposes. It's in celebration."

"Curious coincidence," Doctor Fentress at one side was saying to the young man named Don, while relieved chuckles sounded about them. "Curious coincidence, Doctor Fergusson. This gentleman you rushed to help is named Fergusson too."

"No coincidence at all," said the young man named Don. "He's my father."

MIDWAY in his engagement with the flask, old Pop Fergusson looked around. His hand brushed across his eyes as though unbelievingly.

"Don! Laddie! What the devil are you doing here? I thought you were at the hospital in Chicago!"

So that was it. Something in Shorty's heart arose and sang as he looked at the pair. This was old Pop Fergusson's boy in college, was it. Then his eyes flashed around to the face of the young girl he knew only as Jean. And at what they saw there, they turned away, abashed.

"Come on, Dad, let's get out of this."

Dr. Donald Fergusson slipped an arm under a wiry old arm clad in the bright crimson silks of the Holton stables. Shorty stepped forward and took the other.

"Let go of me, both of you," demanded Pop Fergusson indignantly. "Do you think I need a nurse and a baby carriage because I slipped for a minute?"

Sturdily he set off down the track toward the paddock and the jockeys' quarters. Beside him strode his son and the girl named Jean. And behind them trailed Shorty and the Kid. After the front row seat he'd held, Shorty was going to see this show through to the finish.

"Wait for me here," directed Pop Fergusson as they came to the door leading to the jockeys' quarters. "I'll be dressed and out in a minute." Close at hand stood Shorty and the Kid while the youth and the girl waited. To Shorty's ears came the voice of the girl.

"Why, Don!" Shorty heard. "So that's what you've been making all this mystery about! As though it mattered in the least! Poor, foolish child!"

And then from young Doctor Fergusson:

"I couldn't help it, Jean. He had made me promise never to say a word without his consent, about who he was and what he was doing. And then all of a sudden we were in love before we knew it, you and I. I tried and tried to write to him about it. But it was the sort of thing I couldn't seem to put on paper in a letter. And then you remember that night I took dinner with you and your father and mother at your home—and they began to talk about family and ancestry and all that sort of thing. It was just plain hell, Jean, to sit there silent about my own folks. And I began to wonder if I wasn't going to cause trouble between you and your folks. I wouldn't have hurt you for worlds. Not that I was ashamed of him. I *wasn't* ashamed of him—" Defiantly the words came. "He sacrificed everything to help me through medical school. He made me take help from him even when I was trying to work my way. He—"

"There, there, Don," she said. "Don't hurt yourself so. There is no need— Anyway, I don't understand why you should—"

"I *must* tell you, now I've started," came the rush of words. "He hasn't a thing in the world to be ashamed of. It's just his foolish pride. He was a great rider up to that spill seventeen years ago, when he was all broken up underneath the hooves at Saratoga. I was just a kid, then. Mother had died. There was just us two together. They told him he couldn't ever ride again. But he couldn't leave the track, Jean. He wasn't happy away from the thoroughbreds. They gave him that job as parade leader. He kept it, year after year, around the circuits. He sent me away to school and lived on almost nothing himself, Jean. But he's made me promise never to say a word about it until he gave permission. He was so ashamed. He—the rider he had been—leading the parade!"

"But what *does* it matter, Don, you foolish child?"

"It mattered to me, because I was so proud of him. And then when I got your letter that you and your folks were running down to New Orleans for the races and the Carnival, I simply had to get leave from the hospital and come on down here. I had to have you meet him and learn all about it. I wanted you to know how fine he was and how proud I was of him."

"Oh, Don," Shorty heard that gentle voice again, infinitely gentle, infinitely compassionate. Steady that voice was and even. "My poor Don. How needlessly you've worried yourself. How utterly foolish you are. Family! What do any of us *know* back of our own grandfathers? And what does it matter anyway—the foolish stuff foolish people talk. I think this is something for us to decide and nobody else in the world. Not even my own father and mother. Haven't we got each other? And am I not every bit as proud of him as you are?"

UP TO where they stood a man had come. A short stumpy figure of a man, with a gnarled, knobby, winter-apple sort of face. His clothes hung baggily on him. An old slouch hat was settled comfortably upon his thick gray hair. His hands were rammed deep in his capacious pockets. His scuffed black shoes looked as though they never had been polished. They never had.

You'd never think to look at him, chuckled Shorty to himself as he grinned in recognition, that Sam Holton's bare word was worth more than many men's uncertified checks. But it was.

"You old Pop Fergusson's boy?" he asked, making straight for Dr. Donald Fergusson. "Want to shake hands with you. You got a dad to be proud of. From what I can see he's got a boy to be proud of. And—" he cocked a whimsical eye with the paternal privilege of age, on the young girl named Jean—"from what I can see, too, Pop's boy picks him a girl to be proud of. Glad to see you can blush, young lady. Most of them these days can't change a shade without opening their war-paint kit. Got over here as quick as I could," he rambled on. "Couldn't even get away from the stables to see Devastation win. Been doctoring a sick horse all day. Then they tell me Pop wins and does a nose-dive, and I come right over. Live in Chicago, don't you? Uh-huh. Be a lot easier for you to visit your dad after this. Soon's this meet's over I'm taking him up to my farm in Kentucky. Need a man like him to sort of bat for me up there when I'm trailing the circuit. It takes his kind to understand the thoroughbreds I raise. Dunno how I've been such a dam' fool as to leave him leading a parade all this time. The way he unkinked that Devastation hawss! Why don't you two plan to spend your honeymoon on that farm of mine? When you two going to step off the deep end, anyway?"

Sam Holton was nothing if not direct.

It was the girl who answered him.

"Where does one go, in New Orleans, to get married right away?" she asked, laughingly.

"Blest if I know," Sam Holton scratched a puzzled head. "Thirty years ago my old lady and me stepped off. In Lexington, too. Not New Orleans. But—" Sam's eye had been roving— "Over there's a young gentleman I always ask when I want to learn something I don't know."

The girl's eyes followed Sam Holton's. They rested on Shorty's grin and his hair of flaming red.

"Jean—" began Dr. Donald Fergusson, mingled emotions making his voice curiously husky. But she wasn't listening. She wasn't looking at him, even. Some compelling thought was stirring within her. Her head, that golden shingled head, held so proudly now beneath her little cloche, tossed up as thoroughbreds on the track toss their heads, spiritedly. Her clear gray eyes stayed centered on Shorty where he stood beside the Gutta Percha Kid. She beckoned them. As they came forward she spoke to the man she loved.

"I've learned a lot this afternoon that I didn't understand before," she said softly. "These two young gentlemen who got me here through the crowd—I heard them talking back there in the stand. They did much to let me know some things I am very proud to know about a very courageous gentleman—your father, Don. Maybe they know something else they can tell me—"

Straight into Shorty's eyes she looked.

"I'm sorry I don't know your name," she said. "Mine's Jean Alstair. But perhaps you can tell me where around New Orleans a man and his girl can go when they wish to be married very quickly?"

"Can I?" Shorty's whole swelling heart was in his speech. "Can I, lady? I'll tell the cock-eyed world I can. There's a million taxis outside. You-all come along with me."

"Jean, you can't do this—" began Dr. Donald Fergusson. But her arm circled around his as she smiled at him through eyes bright with tears.

"Can't I, though?" she said. "You don't half know what I can do when I start. And I've just started the job of being a poor young doctor's wife. Don't you pity him?"

"But your father and mother, Jean—"

"I meant to tell you when we started out today. Dad got a wire last night. He had to go north this noon, on the Panama Limited. Mother went with him. I met you just after I saw them off. I was to go to the Mannerings tonight and stay with Jessie Mannering until Mardi Gras. Jessie'll have to do without me, I'm afraid."

She turned to Sam Holton.

"If you can go through that door and up those very exclusive stairs," she said, "I wish you'd tell Don's father to hurry up if he wants to attend his son's wedding."

Shorty, heading taxi-ward with the Gutta Percha Kid beside him, was cursing softly to himself beneath the burden of emotions for which no words have ever been minted. On the tip of his tongue, ready for the taxi-chauffeur, was the address of a marrying justice of the peace.

He raised an imperious hand. A golden-hued Chariot of Heaven, straight-bound for Paradise, leaped forward to his summons. He turned to the Gutta Percha Kid.

"What's a few rats like the Big Feller and his gang matter, anyway?" he demanded fiercely. "What's the use of losing sleep over 'em? They's always thoroughbreds, ain't they?"

Next Month—the Beginning of a New Novel by Beatrice Grimshaw, "Black Sheep's Gold"

What MARS Has Joined

By A. A. Caffrey

The Story Behind the First Coast-to-Coast Non-Stop Flight

THAT NIGHT at the Criterion, the news weekly was showing the wreck pictures of the U. S. S. S. dirigible *Roma*. The *Roma*, you will recall, was a several-year-old, patched-up gas bag which our service bought from Italy; in whose wreckage some score of Yank airmen were sacrificed. All local followers of air, thoroughly crushed by the wholesale murder, were on hand at the Criterion and sore.

T. B. Smith and I were late for the first performance, so, when several hundred patrons filed out, via our feet, we drew in closer and waited. T. B. was a newcomer to town; but an old man in air. He had been saying nasty things about those responsible for the purchase of the *Roma*. He was also making very particular inquiries about the local flying set.

The last couple to locate and hesitate upon our feet was well known to us. The man, Jim Fields, recognized T. B. in the half-light and passed the time of day. The latter, still blind and blinking, tried to do the nice thing but was plainly at a loss. With the crush, Fields and the girl passed.

"I know that bird," T. B. said, "Who is he, and the girl?"

"Fields," I said, "and the girl—"

"Old Lamb's daughter Pearl—eh? But what is she doing with Fields? Didn't she marry—"

"Say, T. B., what's the use of us being in the royal family if we can't be different? Since when has a high-ranker's daughter hesitated to do the right thing by Fame. Fields, you know was on the *Roma* when she went down. He's famous again; of course, you and I and Pearl know that he was famous before.

"Fame is the most fickle jade of the gang. She trails only with winners, and while they're winners. The minute the ink dries on their publicity—she's gone.

"For instance; ask any one, who was the first to fly?

"Some highbrow will answer Icarus. That's bunk. Next, Darius Greene holds strongly in popular fancy. The Smith brothers you say? No; they're the boys with the fine whiskers. The Wright boys; they had the wings. But crowding the Wrights for aerial fame, William 'Non-Stop' Collier is the one you know best. That is, T. B., if you are Mr. John Public.

"When you recall that first non-stop coast-to-coast flight you think of Collier. Every one does. Little was known of the plane used. The other pilot with Collier—Joe Fields—who ever heard of him?" The news reel flickered on the silver.

THIS yarn deals with Joe Fields. He doesn't deserve sympathy because he'll never stand up for himself. This story would still be tucked away in his hard head if we hadn't got him half drunk—with a crying jag. He didn't mean to talk then, but there was a girl in the case, he was crying mad, as I said, with a sympathetic souse on, so the truth came out.

We were sitting in the officers' club at Cheff Field—some two years after the flight, mind you—when the thing happened. It was on the night of our monthly shindig and drunk. Along toward three in the morning everything had been lapped up, and the party was beginning to drag. The best parties will do that. The married officers and their women lived at the club and now, reluctant about calling it a day while somebody might yet dig up some "real old stuff," stalled in the lounge and flew-from-the-leather. There were three or four others and Fields.

For a moment Fields had weakened. He snoozed and his head drooped toward the floor. Just then, trying for the door, "Non-Stop" Collier, with the missus on his arm, passed.

For a moment, Mrs. Collier paused. She laughed at Fields, tangled a hand good-naturedly in his hair and shook his head: "Come, Jimmie," she teased. "You're always sleeping; the flight's over and you're on the west coast—all out!"

Fields came to with a start. He colored. Laughing, Collier and the wife passed out. Mad now, for the first time in his life, Fields spoke:

"Always sleeping!—eh?" he repeated. "You birds know that she was referring to the coast-to-coast hop. I'll tell you about that hop . . . Damned if I don't! . . . Never told it before, either." He watched the girl pass from view, blabbered and went on:

"You birds know how I got roped for that flight; know that I didn't want anything to do with it!"

We remembered Fields' objection to the flight. At the time many others had objected. The objection was because of the plane used. A European plane. As Fields and the other objectors saw it, the desire and ambition to be the first to fly our country non-stop was a great incentive for American building. With this flight in view, Americans had spent much time, money and effort. So, when the "brains" at Cheff Field—upon Collier's suggestion—undertook to groom that European plane for our great American classic the objection went up; it went to Washington; it went to every American airman's heart. As we saw it the idea was all wrong. The first plane to make that flight should be American built. It was nothing short of criminal to throw all the ensuing publicity and advertising toward Europe to the detriment of our own struggling builders and dreamers. But Fields and the other objectors were yelled down for trying. The grooming went ahead; the day set for the take-off drew near.

Another pilot had been picked to accompany Collier. At the eleventh hour the higher-ups decided that the other pilot would not do, so they switched to Fields. He objected. Over his justified objection the order stood. He went.

Shortly after ten o'clock on a clear July night, many thousands gathered at Cleveland Field, had seen that history-making plane get under way.

To the casual onlooker it was just a take-off. But to the followers of air it was something awful. That plane with its ton and a half of gasoline carried certain death for Collier and Fields in the event that anything went wrong on their getaway. So, among the air-wise, there were breathless endless minutes before the departing ship cleared the hangars and rode in the clear. But that take-off comes later.

For a minute Fields had left his chair to cross the room and take a picture from its hangings. The picture was one of him and Collier at the Pacific end of that flight. That picture was of two tired, spent men.

"Well, to you," Fields said, "this is just a snap-shot of two tired, goofy birds. Funny, you say! Our postures and faces funny? Ludicrous almost—yes! Well, perhaps, but I can't see it that way. By the way, that isn't a smile on my face, nor is it a grin. It is just something emissive of a brain too far gone, too badly sapped, too—too everything. As for that mawkish, insipid, leering map of Collier's— Well, perhaps some of you have guessed what happened on that flight. Lots of you have hinted, many have asked me. Always sleeping! I'll tell you a bedtime story that is full of sleep!"

The roaring fireplace took the picture; he went into his yarn:

"Collier made all the preparations for the flight. You will remember that, a few weeks before the day set for the take-off, we flew the proposed route by easy stages, coast-to-coast and back. We had the thing down pat.

"On that try-out trip, at Bacon Field, we stopped in to visit Colonel Lamb and Pearl. It was the first time that Collier met the Lambs. So help me! That guy served the hungry man with his knife. But I could have excused that. The double-crossing I got was what hurt. I was always brought up to keep off the grass in the other fellow's garden of love; I've been a white man there, at least.

"On that visit Collier did nothing but spout in the loud first person. I didn't know him very well at the time and supposed that I was moving with the guy who discovered air. He sounded like a great flyer. I was anxious to get under way on the big hop as much as I had hated the thing when first proposed. Could anybody be as good as he sounded? Hardly.

"Well, when we said good-by to the Lambs and hopped off for our return to Cheff Field, I was beginning to doubt my stand with Pearl. If Collier had been at all smooth the thing might have been within the realm of reason, but, considering his general get up, well—

"On the return trip there was little love lost between Collier and me. When the day for the hop-off came, I was all set and anxious to get under way. It was going to be a long day's work, that flight, and I wanted to see this Collier under fire.

"All day he had posed and talked. Ten o'clock came, then, in the dark, we took off.

"We were hardly under way, the wheels not yet off the ground, when Collier went bad on me. Cleveland Field, on the east coast, you will remember, was the starting point. From the east end of the field, with Collier handling the controls, we gunned into the bootless lift of a washy west wind. The three tons of plane and fuel rumbled down the mile of take-off and each punishing second brought the western fence and bordering hangars closer and closer. Halfway of the field's length, and with full motor roaring, Collier humped his controls and tried bouncing the plane and its tonnage into the air. That failed. Collier paled. And by then the take-off stretch was nearly all behind; not once had the ground-rumble quit the ship; not for a second had she taken the air or showed any signs of buoyancy. Incubus-like, the western buildings, growing terrifically large in the moonlight, came closer. She looked like a sure pile-up.

"The flight nearly ended right there.

"Standing just behind Collier, I had the auxiliary controls within reach. He stared at the oncoming barriers. Then I outguessed and beat him to it, for just as he decided to kill his motor, drop the tail and turn off in a ground-loop my left hand shot the throttle ahead to its last notch, and, with my right, I outleveraged him on the controls. And the hangars were closer, too close. Now a few more tight moments. Then the plane humped, lumberingly, into the air. I saw and heard a hangar roof swish past the cabin windows and, up front, motionless and sullen, Collier was back on his controls.

"In keeping with its elephantine take-off, the plane now flew like a ton of brick. Heavy. Slow on the controls. Hardly under control.

"For minutes and miles we hedge-hopped just above buildings and trees; kept off the ground but that's all. Our cargo of fuel—enough for thirty hours' flight—had the great plane last-strawed to death. When Collier crowded the climb for a single second the ship reciprocated by growling and groaning and losing altitude. It struck me that I was outnumbered; the ship and Collier were in accord—and against me. But he couldn't land with that weight; so carried on.

"The bay and about two hundred feet of space were under us by the time twenty minutes had passed. Then the Jersey side, coming out of its smoke bank under the murky western sky, promised us nothing. It looked like much gloom and a chance of rain. And Collier slouched a little lower in his basket-seat, looked a little more abject and promised trouble ahead. The motor—till then I hadn't noticed it—was with me; the good old Liberty was on my side! And fighting the winged tonnage foot after foot to win altitude that came slow and hard. Man, you never saw altitude that came harder—altitude that was so fickle and ready to slip out with the first bump or pocket, but we churned on and across the flats and lower bay.

"So we were stalling slowly onward, bucking a freshening three-quarter headwind that killed our actual ground speed down to about a mile per—and, in the air, that’s bad. There was no life on the control surfaces; no reserve to be summoned, in a pinch, from the laboring motor; nothing of cooperation coming from Collier. And that was the place in a lifetime for that long pull and a strong pull and a pull all together, but, except for the good, old, struggling Liberty, the whole works stood anti.

“Midnight gave us the lights of Harrisburg just under our landing-gear. “At one-thirty we checked our direction and drift with the lights and smoke of Pittsburgh’s hellish stacks and ovens, and the skyline ahead was beginning to level out and lose its portentous aspect.

“Rapidly that piled-up world had fallen away and Ohio’s crazy-quilt of rolling farm lands, as dizzy as a cubist millennium, rolled less and less, flattened out and the going was good. Going—gone, too, was the moon.

“Reaching up, a cloud bank in the south took away that orb with a subtle deftness akin to black magic, snuffed out its light with a suddenness appalling, sent Collier piloting into the jaws of darkness, mutinous and afraid. The gang had always called him ‘game;’ said that he had guts. Now, where the exhaust stacks’ irradiant glare cast their glow, I saw a face of ash, watched the rat-a-tat quiver of his chops, knew when the ultimate battalions of fear moved in and—as a warning—I cracked the auxiliary throttle and shook the controls, just as his last bit of mastery fagged. Game! Guts! Collier usurped all that fear for which Gunga Din knew no use.

“At three A.M., over Columbus, I relieved Collier. As he quit the controls in the upper open cockpit, I handled the plane from the cabin’s auxiliary assembly. The first signs of coming daylight were palely graying the eastern sky when Collier came aft, slid into the seat as I stepped out, and said, ‘When daylight comes, we land. I’ve had enough of this; this crate will never clear the Rockies; this motor isn’t there. At Indianapolis—set her down.’

“‘Like hell I will, Collier! This flight was your bright idea. We’ll go through now or bust!’

“‘You’ll go down at Indianapolis!’ he yelled as I climbed forward to the front controls. ‘I’ll cut your switch at the race track—you’ll do as I say!’ Well, he had me there. Were he to cut my switch and kill the motor— Down is right— I’d have no other choice. And he could do it. Moreover, I felt sure, he would do it. Then again— Not if I knew it!

“Then matters took a bad turn. Flying, and occasionally watching Collier over my shoulder, I saw him rummage through his small musette bag of personal belongings. He had always been pretty strong for the fire-water. I should have expected that he’d bring some along. He had. Standing back there in the dim light of the cabin, stopping to glare and cuss me between drinks, Collier was killing a bottle. He never quit for a minute till the soldier was dead.

“Then, with arms crossed and legs braced wide apart, he took a stand near the auxiliary controls—within reach of the switch—and waited for Indianapolis.

“Shortly after three-thirty, we passed Dayton. There was enough light then by which to land but I knew that he would not care to slide into the Army field a quitter. There’d be no way to alibi; but there my safety ended. Collier was struggling to remain awake. Growing hostile, getting drunk.

“At four o’clock, dimly outlined in the morning’s haze, we found Indianapolis. Collier moved ahead to my elbow.

“‘There’s the race track,’ he said.

“He was pointing through a small glass window below the floor boards of my cockpit. His head, wabbling, was very close to my right knee.

“‘Where?’ I asked.

“‘Right there, you bonehead!’ He pointed again and bent lower to the floor—‘Idle now and start your glide!’

“In the tool rack, just behind the motor and above Collier’s head, was a rawhide motor hammer. As he pointed, that hammer left its holder and Collier collapsed slowly back into the comparative quiet of the cabin. He was asleep.

“Indianapolis went by, and a few hours later, to the general discomfort of Collier the strong, July morning sun burned through the early mist and flooded the south windows of the glassed cabin compartment.

“Where he sprawled, in the bright glare, his face writhed and twitched. There was, as time went on, a great danger that he would revive. If he did so, over that level country, the trip would end. Once on his feet, and cutting my switch, he would be able to force a landing almost any place along our line-of-flight. And he'd do it—no kiddin'; he was just naturally nasty.

"Well, I went into deep thought and tried to figure the thing out. If I could keep him out of mischief until such time as it took to reach the Rockies, I'd have some show. Once in over the bad going, there'd be no place to set down. I could turn him loose then and get some help with the flying. So I changed my course a little, turned north, and the sun's glare quit his face.

"Then, in keeping with my half-baked plan, I crowded the motor and tried for altitude. Man! Getting even four thousand feet was worse than trying for money from home; it came, but not willingly.

"In a black blur of smoke, along toward six, far to the south, St. Louis passed. Then town after town, throughout Missouri, waved white plumes where locomotives and factories tooted whistles and sent their steam into the sky; to cheer us on our way. And Collier slept. But Collier could not be expected to sleep forever—no such luck! That motor hammer was too light.

"At nine o'clock Kansas City and its dirty yellow river saw us go by, sent a million white puffs into the air and, I suppose, made a great din. I lost my interest in the city when Collier moved for the first time. Something had to be done, and within the next half-hour or so.

"A little west of K. C. one-half the distance would be down. That meant, also, that about one-half my gasoline weight would be exhausted. At the start, the plane had been very tail-heavy because of that load of gasoline and the position of the great tank. Soon there must come a few flying-minutes when the plane would lose the last trace of tail-heaviness and fly on an even longitudinal balance. Then it will slowly pass to the nose-heavy stage, and the nose-heaviness must increase—as the gasoline is used—until we've landed.

"When the plane should come to an even flying balance, there would be minutes when I might quit the controls. Over that flat country and at five thousand feet—the plane had gained that altitude—I could easily take a chance. So I watched the pressure on my surface, kept an eye on Collier, and hoped.

"Near Topeka the chance came. I set my throttle in a position that seemed to fly the ship just even. Slowly I removed hands and feet. The guess was good. She flew alone. In the cabin, binding the Liberty tool kit, were two stout inch-wide straps. I yanked these from their rivets, rolled Collier over, and secured him hand and foot. It took hardly a minute. He was on the point of coming to, struggled a little, but weakly. The plane nosed up slightly and flew nicely. Then I was at the controls once more. Plenty tired now, but thrilled by that little job of fast work. Good planes, those foreigners.

"There isn't much beyond Topeka until you get to Broadway and Seventh, Los Angeles; so remaining awake was hard work. Now and then, I'd lose myself, snoozing, come to with a start and find the plane in a groundward glide. That's dangerous. Very bad joss! No good for Europe!

"By noon the shadow of our craft was snailing across southwestern Kansas and the tops of the Taos range, showing above the heat-haze of New Mexico's sky sent out their warning calling for more altitude. The seven thousand feet necessary was an altitude hard to get, and when, at three o'clock, I found myself clearing those tops, it was with only feet to spare. Now and again, I backlapped, flew around the highest points, but went on; and the world was all out of shape, for my flying judgment was all askew. Then when the motor's noise seemed like so many tin cans—far, far away—I began to know just how near gone I was.

"I tried all those things that don't help at all. You know: Sang to myself. Took off the helmet, and pounded my dome. Rubbed my eyes till I'd made them worse. Worked my arms and legs, till I'd rocked them to sleep. Stood on the rudder-bar and stretched my head away from the motor's heat and into the propeller's cooler slip-stream. Took long drags of hot breath. Bit down hard on dry, dead lips. Tried centering my attention on earthly things at a distance. Then studied the map. Counted all the screwheads in the floor boards. Tried separating and detecting the different motor noises, valves popping from cam rolling, gear lash from propeller throb, carburetor suction from the wind singing through the radiator's mesh, etc., etc., and nothing broke the sleepy monotony. And all for Europe—Nothing else but:

"That wheat country is sure yellow and

hot during July. At five thousand, in that cloudless white sky, with that hot motor at my elbow, it was like holding a reserved seat in a bake oven. Even the wooden grips on the control wheel were hot, and that wheel—its forward pull was beginning to get mighty heavy. The nose-heaviness was coming into the plane's balance. And when a big ship gets nose-heavy it's work!

"Then for a little while, the plane's fuel system gave me trouble and took my attention from the heat and sleep.

"The air-pressure pump, to the main gas tank, went hay-wire. The instrument-board gauge failed to register, the carburetors sucked air, and the motor dropped a few shots. I headed down in a glide and swung over to the reserve tank, the motor picked it up and we went on, whew! That would make a hot dog forget its fleas. *Gott mit uns!*

"I hand-pumped then for an hour or two, off and on, and the air pressure, for no reason at all, started to work again.

"Then all the old troubles came back; it was hell! Oh, I was going to have a devil of a job staying awake.

"Along toward eight, as near as I could guess, my position was some place north of Phœnix. There wasn't going to be much more daylight. The purple was heavy in the low places. And I was just big-headed, abuse-drunk with head aswim, and done for. I looked to Collier. Collier? I could use him now.

"He had managed to crawl to a position at my feet and was trying to say something. I wasn't hearing anything, not even the motor. But I half-realized that he was now sober.

"Collier knew that southwestern country better than I. He knew it, perhaps, better than any other flyer in the game. I reached down and managed to unbuckle the strap from his wrists. He removed the other from his ankles. Then he went to the auxiliary controls, I felt his shake, 'I'm flying,' relinquished my hold, and, in some way, went into the cabin and steadied the ship while he went forward. After that, I remembered nothing. Forgot Europe.

"From there into Pacific Island there was less than three air-hours' travel. The world knows that Collier made it. The world also knows that I was sound asleep when the plane landed. That's all the world does know—that I'm always asleep!

"They tell me that the Lambs were there to meet us, that they had journeyed west to be there when we landed. I've seen many other pictures since, pictures of Pearl and Collier. He seems to have been able to stand up and pose by the hour, seems to have been an iron man for camera-punishment. That is the one abuse that we airmen like best, camera-punishment.

"I understand that Collier told how easy the trip was. He even spoke of passing over cities that we had not even seen at a distance. Nobody ever checked up on that but it's a cinch that headquarters must have known that something was wrong; but, oh hell!—headquarters take cares of its royal family. The service must be served. The public?—never!

"So the last few hundred miles and the landing by flood-lights is a blank as far as I'm concerned. It's strange how long and solid you can sleep when dog-tired. And it's a caution what they'll hang on you and cheat you out of when you are asleep. But, of what I did for her, they can't rob Europe."

Fields lighted a smoke and peered over his shoulder into the room at his back. Some one stepped aside in the dark.

"Anybody in there?" Fields queried.

"No," I lied. "A dogrobber, perhaps. Go on."

"That's about all," he said sleepily. Fields had just about reached a place where he needed a strong shoulder upon which to cry. He was growing very mushy and thinking more and more of the girl and less of Collier. That is, if he could think less of Collier.

The others were very deep in the leather, sleeping heavily, done. Poor men to carry poorer liquor.

"I can't remember getting out of the plane. I suppose they lifted me out, stood me on my hind legs, and shot that damned picture. Everywhere now I find it leering at me. And I'd like to forget.

"After that I slept for two days solid. For the same length of time, they tell me, Collier spoke to the press representatives in first person. Once or twice he seems to have forgotten and admitted that I was along as a passenger on the flight. That ill-smelling eucalyptus-kitty of a Collier! I don't mind his getting the fame but before that flight I was high man with Pearl." Pearl you know was Collier's wife. So Fields went into a spell of crying.

From where I was sitting, shortly after Fields had first started to talk, I had seen a woman enter the building through the side door. Now, listening, she stood, unseen by Fields and the others, just beyond the door. By crossing the room and studying the plate glass mirror above the mantel, I discovered her identity. It was Mrs. Collier. In her hand she caried Collier's hat; evidently had forgotten it, and she had returned alone. Collier always went out early; but the missus was one of the best drinkers in our set. She had heard the story.

"I wouldn't have cared," Fields concluded, "if Collier had only been game enough to tell her. Always—always asleep? —me, I'm the guy who never sleeps!" Then I gave the others the high-signs. For a second they hesitated, then, one by one, quit the room and deserted Fields. He dreamed nightmares, perhaps, of Europe's guest. The last to leave, I hesitated beyond the nearly closed door. She came into the room. For a minute her hands played through Field's hair. Then he awoke.

"Well, what Mars has joined together is, as a rule, easily broken asunder. They say that being slightly out of step is ample grounds for divorce in the Army set; Collier was never much on parade."

"Some night," T. B. said as we left the nearly empty Criterion, "I'm going to come to the first show so's I can walk over the other guy's feet on my way out. I never seem to get any fun.

"About old Lamb's Pearl," he went on when we had reached the better-lighted foyer. "What were you going to say about her running with Fields?"

"Why, she and Fields are going to try it double just as soon as her year's up, only a few months now."

"Fields's a dud, right!" T. B. cussed. "If I'd 've come down with the *Roma*, and lived to tell it, I'd do just that—tell it. There's a fortune in telling the public about that old bag, and Fields goes around with his tongue in his cheek and passes the thing up cold. Fame's wasted on him. Not so Collier. He'd tell the cock-eyed world, and in first person. Where is Collier, anyway?" At the outer doors we nearly stumbled over an usher who was busy locking the floor latches. "Hello, T. B.," the usher said, as T. B. climbed from the speaker's back. "What you doing in town—stationed at Cheff again?"

"Collier!—I'll be damned!—Collier!" was all T. B. could say. "Yes, I'm at Cheff; come out and say hello. So long, now; see you later."

When we were on the street, T. B. asked, "What's that noisy bird doing ushering—why did he quit the service—when?"

"Why, Collier did what you want Fields to do now. When the *Roma* was first set up, Collier got a peek at the old salvage. He thought out loud. Somebody heard him think out loud. He had the usual choice between a nice hot spot on the Mexican border or a chance to quit. Well, he's tried the private life thing and postponed too many meals. He's working here in town now and waiting for a reinstatement. Then, perhaps and no doubt, a trip to the Islands. He's ready to come back now with his vocabulary bobbed down to two words—'Yes, sir'."

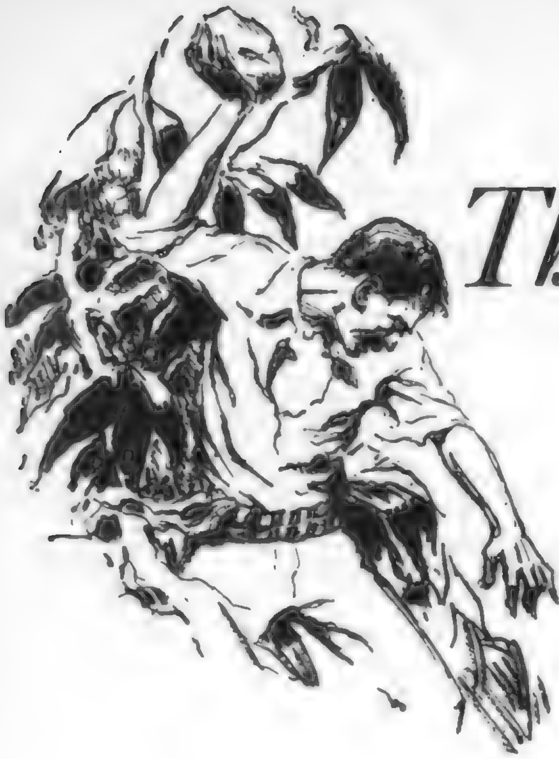
"Well," T. B. decided, "Mitchelizing a service might secure quiet running but it results in a dull finish. Guess you and Collier and Fields best talk Chinese; ushering and taxi driving require a certain amount of personality.

"Say 'Yes, sir'—and say it nice."

"Yes, sir."

"You'll do!—for thirty years."

A Complete



The THREE

the

Sumatra, a Crafty Sultan and a Girl who tried to outwit him

BRUNDAGE nearly went mad when he saw the girl coming down the gang-plank into Sumatra and comprehended the fate to which she was going so innocently, so smilingly, with so happy a glory glinting in her brown eyes. Brundage was the only white man in Port Santur.

Other men there had white skins. Notably the Dutch under-resident, and the two Aussi traders, and the captain in command of the sepoys, and those three gentlemen over the hill who administered Sultan Ibrahim's territory in the interest of the Dutch East Indies. Take them one by one, and what did the skin amount to? The Dutch under-resident had three native wives and something of a record. The two Australians, when sober, were not the sort to be asked for aid by any white woman; when drunk, as they usually were, both were fairly decent fellows. The sepoy captain had Eurasian eyes and nails in his white skin, and was reputed to have the soul of a snake. The three gentlemen over the hill in the sultan's capital were strictly there to help themselves. Brundage knew instantly they were in the plot to betray this girl.

However, one had to make sure; there was the skipper of the steamer. Brundage was a trader, a man of hard repute, suffered by the Dutch without love, he had been hoping to depart on the morrow when this boat left. He watched the girl go ashore and enter Hop Soy's very clean and respectable hotel—it was just sunset, too late for her to go on over the hill—then he went aboard and got the skipper to one side. He knew the man slightly.

"Nobody can hear us," he said, his rather bitter gray eyes boring deep. "Tell me who the woman is. Another governess?"

The Dutchman swallowed hard. "Another," he said in a dull voice.

"You damned dirty cur!" said Brundage, without heat. "And you, knowing everything, let her come?"

"No." The skipper's jaw set hard for an instant. "No, mynheer. I warned her covertly, and she smiled. I hinted, and she smiled. At length, I came out and told her the truth. And what do you think she did? She smiled. That was all."

"All!" repeated Brundage suspiciously. "Did you tell her about the girl who came out here from England last year?"

"That was part of the truth I told her," said the other, honestly enough. "I spared her nothing. And she smiled! Well, you can not understand until you meet the

Novelette

MEN *Over* HILL

by

H. Bedford-Jones

smile. There was no more to be said. My friend, the devil of it is that she is on the same errand."

"Of course," said Brundage, and went ashore.

When the heart of an impetuous man is hot within him, he has regard for nothing. Brundage had little regard for anything at the best of times, but now he went straight to Hop Soy's hotel and straight up to the one room over the court reserved for the occasional white person who came to Port Santur. He knew his way and paused for none. He rapped sharply at the door, tried it, found it unlocked, and stepped into the room. The girl was there, leaning over a grip she had half unpacked.

"Well?" she asked. "What do you want?"

Brundage shut the door and took off his helmet.

"I want to talk to you," he said crisply. "My name's Brundage. I'm a trader here. Is it true you've come to take the job of governess?"

"Yes," she said quietly. No more.

"Then sit down." Brundage gestured to a chair and pulled up one for himself. He took out a cheroot and lighted it. She took the chair and regarded him, all in a quietly poised fashion as though she were neither astonished nor disconcerted.

BRUNDAGE knew suddenly he had met his match in will. Nothing bitter in her gaze, nothing hard and cold and efficient, like his own; wide-set eyes, very blue, and a face leaving an indistinct impression of fresh spring flowers and golden sunlight, impossible to describe. Not beautiful at all, as a camera registers beauty, and therefore the truer. All the same, when he looked into her eyes, Brundage felt himself baffled and queerly vagrant in fancy.

"Pack up again," he said, with an access of gruffness. "You're going right out on that boat. You're not going on to that job."

She smiled, and suddenly he remembered what the skipper had said. A quiet little smile, and pretty indeed to see, yet touching her face alone—not her eyes. By contrast, they seemed more deep and baffling than ever, in their perfect poise. Brundage noted that she sat in her chair absolutely without movement, and this backed up the warning of her eyes. No ordinary girl here.

"Don't you know it's a damned trap?" he blurted out, feeling a surge of passionate fury sweep from soul to brain. "That cursed sultan doesn't want any governess. What he wants is a white woman—another. You're not the first. You've got to realize facts, girl."

Still she smiled, for a moment, as though the shaft of his brutal words had glanced upon some far and impervious armor that shielded her spirit. Then she spoke.

"You are hasty, Mr. Brundage—is that the name? However, I owe you thanks for your good intentions. Shall I tell you exactly the situation?"

"If you will," he responded, throttling himself down hard.

"There was an advertisement in a social paper," she said, quiet, motionless to her finger-tips. "I responded and called at a firm of solicitors in the city."

"Shysters everywhere, even in London," said Brundage. "English, eh? I thought so. The last one was. Yes, you'll find shysters willing to sell women into bondage. Go ahead."

"Perhaps they were sincere in their beliefs," and her voice was gentle. "They supplied money, and I came. At Singapore, some one seemed quite excited and took up the matter with some official, against my will, so that I just came away without waiting. I'm here."

"My lord, you are!" said Brundage fervently. "The sultan doesn't need a governess, I'm telling you. Do you want me to put it into water-front language? Do I have to use filthy terms to impress you with the reality? Can't you comprehend?"

She moved a little, and he was checked.

"I quite comprehend your fears for me," she said. "It's very good of you, but I assure you they are groundless."

"Groundless!" Brundage shot out of his chair and pointed. "Once over that hill, you're beyond help! Once in that accursed palace, you're lost! None of these half-breed Dutch will turn their fingers over for you. They're all island-born, Eurasians. The sultan fills their pockets. He's a crafty devil, educated in England, and knows what he wants. And—"

The girl, too, rose. She looked very slim, very delicately small and slender and almost pitiful, so that Brundage found a swift ache in his heart for her. Yet her gaze was very composed and restful, as though her eyes were windows lighted by deeply hidden sunlight.

"I know, too, what I want," she said, with a slow lingering on the words that startled Brundage. "You are an American, Mr. Brundage? I appreciate your kindness, but I tell you not to be afraid for me."

"How can I help it?" said Brundage shortly.

"By not being afraid. By thinking back—back across the years."

"Eh?" He frowned, as he stared. "What are you talking about?"

"Memory. Undoubtedly you once heard the words: 'The spirit of knowledge and of ghostly strength.' Ah, so you remember them! But you do not know to what they refer—what they mean! Few people do."

IT CAME to Brundage that she was a bit off in her head. A hard thing to accept. Doubly hard, because under these wandering words he sensed a solid stratum of common sense, which reduces everything to simple essentials. Simplicity is a very clear and very terrible thing in any part of the world, but chiefly so in Sumatra—where it is apt to be helpless as well, if one can ever call simplicity helpless.

"Never mind about religion," he said slowly, knowing in his heart that it was actually the thing that did matter above all others. "Never mind the trust in God and all that—no God here, young woman! The only god over the hill is Allah."

He felt himself floundering here, and paused. He felt it in her eyes, from that queer smile of hers which meant nothing at all and yet responded to everything with the same quiet, deadly poise. He began to feel afraid of this girl.

"Got any relatives?" he asked abruptly.

"I had a sister, but she's dead."

"Then I'm going to help, whether you want me or not."

"Thank you, I'll be glad of your help," she responded gravely, to his utter surprise. The whip-crack came swiftly, however. "If by help, you do not mean interference."

Brundage felt the blood sweeping into his face from sheer anger.

"You're stupid!" he cried sharply. "I wasn't here last year, or it wouldn't have happened, I can tell you! There was another one like you, yellow haired, too. She killed herself. You'll go the same way if you're not stopped. You don't know—"

"But I do know," she said quietly.

"You little fool!" he burst out. "Won't you listen to reason?"

Again that baffling, utterly baffling, smile of hers.

"Reason, like truth, is from heaven," she said gently.

"I'm not going to bandy words with you," said Brundage. "I've got a pull with the sultan, or rather, he's afraid of me—I can spoil his little game with the Dutch. I'm one white man who can do about as he likes over the hill, yonder. This time, there'll be no tragedy—I'm going to step in."

"You'd better not," she said, and he sensed a threat here. It staggered him.

"D'you mean, knowing everything, you're going ahead—into the trap?"

"It's not a trap for me," she returned. "I ask you not to interfere unless I request—"

"Oh!" Relief swept Brundage. "Then you'll ask when the time comes, when you need help?"

"If I do, yes."

He laughed shortly. "And suppose by then you're past help? Suppose you're drugged day after day, little by little, until you get past help?"

Color swept across her face, perhaps at the implication of his words.

"That can not happen," she said gently. So flat was her refusal to admit the possibility, so absolute was her tone, and so contrary to fact was the denial, that Brundage was abruptly inflamed by new rage.

"All right, be a fool!" he cried out in a tortured voice. "You'll gang your ain gait —well, what are you laughing at now?"

"Isn't it always funny," she asked, with her smile, "to hear a Yankee talk Scotch?"

Brundage rapped out an oath. "Like that better?" he said harshly. "Suppose I'm going to sit down and count coat-buttons like they do in Singapore, while you're gone? Not much. Five buttons—that's a Dutchman. Four buttons and the pants a fit—that's a Britisher. Fine game! But I'm not playing it. You—you woman, you!" The word was bitter. "A woman, flitter-headed as a chicken, no more sense than a silly old hen, always jumping the wrong way—damnation! Go on over the hill, then, and take the consequences."

He flung out of the room and slammed the door heavily, half-incoherent words pouring from his lips, for despair was upon him terribly. And all the while, as he sought the street, he felt that she was standing there looking at the closed door—smiling.

II

OVER the hill was much farther than it sounded, since the hill was a rangy mountain-shoulder crossed by a track that might some day be a road. From Port Santur, indeed, was a matter of twelve unpleasant miles before one came out upon the royal residence of Sultan Ibrahim.

It is not wise to expect too much in Sumatra. Once away from iron and steel and concrete salesmen, once away from trading stations and the outward trappings of Dutch rule, all the tremendous country becomes primitive, and royalty shrinks into petty rulership. Just how far the lordship of Sultan Ibrahim extended, was an unsolved question, and nobody cared to solve it; certainly not the sultan himself, who was quite content with the shadow of power and plenty of money.

When they took over the Santur district, or rather when they pacified it with bullets, the Dutch built a fine palace for the puppet sultan, and turned it over to the little brown monkey of a man and his white advisers. Now Ibrahim sat on the throne and pretended to rule, and enjoyed life.

The palace was a huge white-walled cluster of buildings, with flags above it, soldiers at the gate, and servants galore. With its pleasant gardens and artificial lake, it stood on a hilltop, or sprawled over it, while just below lay the town. Not much of a town by any standard; thatched houses, one or two large godowns, many chickens and naked children, with the Canton Mercantile Company at the end—houses and compound, godowns, store. Hang La was this company, an old and venerable man of China, with half a dozen of his own race or breed to help him. It was Hang La who kept the place on the map and paid taxes, for those yellow fingers were gripped deep and far through the hills and valleys of the district.

Isolated and petty as it was, yet the place broke upon the eyes of Marjorie Hampton in beauty, and from first sight to last, this beauty did not lessen. The high green peaks all around, the deeper green of the jungle, the white palace and yellow town, all were stabbed by flashing glints of color—as the great flame-tree that stood before the palace gates, with its scarlet glory regal on the sun-white afternoon. Contrasts everywhere, even to the three white men who met the girl at the gates, bowing low and changing from the Dutch she did not understand to fluent English and French.

There was Vanderhout, rather old, very fat, always merry; a laughing man in whose soul were grouped all the devils of lust. It was Vanderhout who, at the time of the northern rebellion, had burned alive an entire village. One never knew whether his smile masked humor or cruelty. Hoffman the Resident, was young, lantern-jawed, tall; in his deep eyes burned the steady flame of one whose entire life is ruled by a single indomitable purpose, and truly enough. Hoffman's one ambition was to amass money sufficient to get out of the Indies for good and go home. He was amassing it, and rapidly, yet perhaps he was paying a bitter price for the gold. Vanderhout was clever, Hoffman was insatiable, but Onderdonk had a flaming brain. He owned neither morals nor conscience nor ambition, for a prison term lay behind him, disease was in his vitals, and he saw death clearly ahead. He was that rarest of all human creatures, a man who believed in nothing and who therefore feared nothing. His sole enjoyment was to drown the inward agonies of his own soul in the suffering of others.

THESE three greeted Marjorie Hampton. Vanderhout bowed, Hoffman gravely kissed her hand, Onderdonk merely removed his helmet a moment and looked at her with his sardonic eyes. A few commonplace words were exchanged, then came Hajji Ishak to take charge of the girl, with a deep and stately salaam and a greeting in fluent French, and four women attendants whom he placed at her disposal.

The three white men looked after her as she followed. Tall and thin was Hajji Ishak, the only Arab in the place, again offering contrast against the background of small brown hillmen and Malays. Hajji Ishak was old and strong, with one dark brown eye and one blue, and a swarthy white skin, for he was a true Arab from Hadramaut. His white skull-cap, hereabouts a token of the Mecca pilgrimage, and his fine white garments without ornament, gave little hint of his position. He was the *alter ego* of the sultan, a great swordsman, a most evil man from all standards, and faithful beyond words to the man whom he served.

"Well!" said Vanderhout, preening his little mustache, his eyes following the girl's slender figure. "This is not what I expected. I looked for some low-class servant."

"And I," said Hoffman coldly, "anticipated a damned Englishwoman, angular, big of jaw, deadly of eye! You, Onderdonk—you are disappointed too?"

"I am never disappointed," said little Onderdonk, a flash in his sunken eyes. "I think old Ibrahim will have rare sport with this bird he has caged. He may well pay us to view things charitably!"

"Rather a pity we made him pay in advance," reflected Hoffman. "Having seen her, he'll pay more! Well—we've been paid to let her come and keep silence. He'll have to pay us to let her remain, eh?"

Vanderhout still gazed at the palace entrance, where the slender figure had vanished and preened his mustache anew.

"Hm! Decidedly," he approved. "Yes, he must pay, one way or another—"

Onderdonk had a vicious laugh, and now it seemed to bite across the hot sunlight, as acid bites across metal.

"You two gentlemen," he said, "have different ideas of payment. Well, fight it out! I'm off tomorrow to investigate those mining accounts. I'll be up in the hills two weeks or so—make the most of your time! Hoffman, when I come back you'll be a little richer. Vanderhout, you'll have another wife."

Hoffman looked at the little sallow, viperish man.

"And you?"

Onderdonk grinned. "You fools! I'll watch the resultant chaos. And you'll wish she had been a servant or a right-angled woman before you're done—oh, yes! So come along and have a drink, and forget it."

"She will not make trouble," and Vanderhout laughed wheezily. "She is like the one who came here last year—a gentlewoman, is that the word? Bah! Let's drink."

The three went off together to their own quarters in the palace.

Meantime, Marjorie Hampton found herself made at home in a very large and handsome chamber whose shaded balcony overlooked the tiny artificial lake and a corner of the gardens. The room was sumptuous, her luggage had already arrived; and Hajji Ishak, though she could not pronounce his name, impressed her as a very stately and deferential old Arab.

"These women," and he indicated the four attendants, are your slaves. They speak a little English, you a little Malay; there will be no difficulty. Sultan Ibrahim, on whom be peace, desires that his children speak with you only in French or English. We do not care to speak Dutch, having to see enough of those pigs without having to speak their tongue. If you desire anything, command it. The sultan will receive you this evening."

To Marjorie, it must have been like a fairy tale, all this. Her room was filled with the luxuries of Paris. Her wish was supreme law. Nothing she might demand would not be instantly accorded; already her environment had become that of a dream. Here in one corner was an American phonograph in a case of chased and polished silver. In another was an ungainly French radio receiving set tuned to high-wave lengths. Everywhere in the room were precious metals and wondrous stuffs. Nothing was tawdry or old, everything was fresh and new, as though the place had been done over especially for her coming.

"As no doubt it was," she thought aloud, and then smiled at sound of her own voice.

The four women smiled, too. They were sleek, submissive little creatures, shyly wondering at her. They showed her the adjoining dressing-room with its very handsome tiled bath, and with a sense of unwonted luxuriousness, Marjorie submitted to their ministrations. Later, she sat sipping sherbet while an automatic punkah whirled overhead, and presently dismissed her four satellites. She intended to do her own dressing.

"And all this—for a governess!" she said softly, once more looking about the chamber. "True, English governesses are not easily come by here, but at the same time it seems rather unusual."

She smiled a little.

FOR the remainder of the afternoon she rested, and dined in her own room, then was taken to meet her employer. She found him in a book-walled room, a library whose table was littered with American and European magazines; a smallish, slender little man in evening attire, whose English was perfect. He was alone except for his tall white shadow, Hajji Ishak. When Marjorie would have curtsied, he laughed and touched his lips to her fingers, and handed her to a chair.

"Come, no ceremony, Miss Hampton!" He had a thin, boyish voice, oddly disagreeable. The whole man was like a monkey dressed to order. "I shall hope to make your stay with us quite pleasant. Please believe that you have only to express a desire, and it will be granted. You will be in no way confined or limited. I should like you to take your meals with my children, for whom the Koranic law is not material, and to do your best with their manners and speech. If you find this disagreeable, then it can be changed. I leave everything to you."

"It is most kind of your highness," said the girl quietly. "Indeed, I fear you surround me with too much luxury altogether!"

The sultan laughed a little and lighted a long cheroot.

"Not at all. Your predecessor, a young lady who came last year, grew very homesick and unhappy; I believe she was a sufferer from some obscure ailment, for she died very suddenly. Poor young lady! It was very sad, and the children have been inconsolable. They will no doubt speak of her when they meet you tomorrow."

Miss Hampton paled slightly. "I am not apt to be homesick," she said, and her voice was a trifle strained. Sultan Ibrahim gave her a quick glance, and rose.

"You do not like our scented air—you are not used to these things? I forgot—"

"It is a little close, certainly," said the girl, and came to her feet. "I have only one request to make, your highness. Perhaps you'll think it unusual, yet it's not meant to be offensive. I've lost my Bible, and if you have one, I should like it very much—"

The sultan laughed heartily at her hesitant air.

"Nonsense, Miss Hampton! We are really enlightened followers of Muhammad, as our name 'Muslim' signifies! Perhaps there'll be a Bible—why not? We venerate it just as you do, you know. Hajji Ishak, look up the matter at once, without delay, and if you find such a book, have it sent to Miss Hampton."

To this last, spoken in French, the tall Arab salaamed. The sultan took the girl to the door himself and bade her good night.

When the hangings fell, Marjorie Hampton swayed uncertainly, then collected herself and went quietly to her own rooms again, an unusual pallor in her cheeks. Once there, she sent away her four attendants, then dropped into a chair and sat relaxed, motionless, staring before her at the curtained window; her eyes were wide, almost terrified.

She still sat, thus, when a knock came at her door. Startled, she darted up, gave her hair a pat, then went to the door and opened it. Hajji Ishak saluted her and extended a small worn volume.

"It is in English," he said gravely. "I was fortunate to find it so quickly."

Marjorie Hampton thanked him, closed the door, then swung against it, holding the Bible in her hand, as though suddenly faint. She stared down at the book, and the fingers holding it were all a-tremble.

"Hers!" she murmured. "Hers—and if they have not discovered it—"

Rapidly she crossed to the lamp in the corner and began a swift examination of the little worn volume.

III

EXCEPT for the arrival of Marjorie Hampton, Brundage would have been out of Sumatra by the next steamer—he had already engaged passage to Singapore and San Francisco. His pile was made, the weary years were behind him, and now he had been about to head home, with his business profitably sold to Hang La of the Canton Mercantile Company.

He could not get the girl out of his head, however, and after several days of indecision, cancelled his passage and prepared to go over the hill. Brundage knew the folly of trying to advise newcomers. Had Marjorie been a man, he would have let her go and sink in the morass of her own folly; but she was a girl—and such a girl! Secondary to his thought of her, was his thought of the white men up there at Santur; rather, his hatred. He knew all three of them intimately, knew what unspeakable rotters they were, knew perfectly that they were in on the sultan's little game and were getting well paid for abetting it. His anger rose more hotly every time he thought of them. Perhaps Brundage felt that a duty lay upon him, too, though he would have profanely denied the accusation.

Real life is far from having the stuff of books, and hasty conclusions are dangerous. Brundage was past forty, and had every earthly reason not to mix up in this affair. He had sent home his money, and now looked forward to its enjoyment. The calm eyes of Marjorie Hampton wakened no amorous fires in him—his wife and children awaited him in San Francisco, and Brundage was no philanderer. So, he hesitated over the whole thing, as he well might do.

To take a hand in this game would be dangerous. True, he had friends, and Sultan Ibrahim was to a certain extent afraid of him. On the other hand, it meant staking himself against all the shadowy power of the sultan, and all the actual power of the three white men at the palace—it meant fighting them. They would be savage enemies, not for the sake of dragging down Marjorie Hampton, but for the sake of serving their own interests by leaving her to her fate. They would leave her; Brundage would not, could not. This was the difference.

"Well, it may come out all right," he reflected, after sending a letter to his wife. "At least, it ought to come out all right—I'll have to risk it. Not that I want to, mind! The fool girl should be well spanked! But I'll visit Hang La and see what's going on over the hill. It's got to be done."

This was the way Brundage saw it—a thing that had to be done, willy-nilly. And he went about doing it in his own way—a mad, illogical way, perhaps, yet the only way that was possible. Nor was his course really so mad as it appeared. He knew the other side quite intimately, as they knew him; any policy of evasion or caution would be mere folly, and his only chance lay in a bold, aggressive front and swift action. So, his luggage off home and everything here well disposed, he set out for the town over the hill, taking only a hand-bag.

It was nearly evening when he arrived. Old Hang La greeted him with open arms and talk of a feast even then preparing, and made him affably at home. No personal talk was exchanged—only generalities. The dinner began, a meal served in traditional style with all the delicacies thereof, and Brundage, who was not impatient, made the most of it.

Thirty-odd courses passed in silence, except for the customary polite inquiries and dippings into affairs general. Then Hang La plunged, as the devil-fish came in.

"This is a happy surprise, my friend," he said, blinking his heavy lids. "I thought you had left by this time. Business has detained you, perhaps?"

"I'm through with business, as you know," said Brundage. "No. Duty detained me, I'm sorry to say."

Hang La chuckled softly. He was not a benevolent old man at all, and his long life had been largely misspent, from western standards; he enjoyed himself, he sat apart and looked at the currents of life flowing past, and he had slight respect for anything except the ancestral tablet set up in his inner room.

"I am not blind," he observed, half cynically. "In the few days since her arrival, things have happened. Mynheer Hoffman goes about whistling; there he has obtained money. Mynheer Vanderhout has a new wife, a very pretty half-caste from the sultan's private stock. Mynheer Onderdonk is in the hills and returns some time this week, so I do not know yet what he will obtain. They all thought you would be gone, of course. Your presence here will prove disconcerting. It will not be liked."

"Perhaps not," said Brundage, grimly.

"Accidents may easily happen," added Hang La significantly.

THEREAFTER came diversion of other topics, at least temporarily. Brundage left the talk to Hang La, curious to see what was in the old man's mind. Help he did not expect, but advice he might get, for that would be like a chess game to the old merchant.

At the forty-third course, Hang La abruptly came around to the main issue again.

"How long do you expect to be here?"

"A week," said Brundage, "or a month, or all year. Until the job is finished."

"Where will you stay?"

Brundage smiled. "Not with you. At the palace, as the sultan's guest."

"Oh!" The wrinkled saffron face cracked in a grin. "I remember. You learned about the little deal between the sultan and those two French diamond hunters, eh? Well, our friend Ibrahim made a lot of money from the illegality, but if the Dutch learned of it they would do something. Still, I do not see what you expect to accomplish."

"I expect to take Miss Hampton away."

"She seems quite content. I have seen her several times, riding."

Brundage frowned. "I do not understand her," he confessed. "She has been warned, yet she persists."

"She is no child, nor a fool," reflected the old man. "Why attempt to understand, my friend? We are not omniscient. But there is a proverb about stepping on the tail of the tiger; in fact, much of the Shi King is written on this subject. If you go to the palace as a guest, you should remember it."

"No fear," said Brundage quietly. "By the way, will one of your junks stop at Port Santur inside the next fortnight?"

Hang La studied over this question for two more courses, meditating on its implications and on just how far he might safely commit himself. To give Brundage overt assistance was far from his mind; he valued his peace and his trading concession too highly to jeopardize it by taking any sides openly.

On the other hand, he knew perfectly well that Brundage was running high risks—less with the sultan than with his white advisers. For one man to enter any game against this pack of wolves was senseless folly; for him to enter such a game as this, where his winning would mean disgrace and exposure for the others, meant a duel to the death. Therefore, promises might safely be made. If made, they would be kept to the letter—this was Hang La's great virtue.

"There is a junk bound down to Batavia and Singapore, which might touch first at Malacca," he responded slowly. "It is named *Wave-subduing Moonlight*, and the captain's name is Li Tock Sui, a branch of the Cantonese Li family. On the seventh day from this, it will arrive at Port Santur. Two passengers might go aboard quietly and be taken to Malacca, if they were possessed of a card from me."

"Very well," said Brundage. He quite understood that the card would reach him in course of time; understood, too, that Hang La had really strained a point in making such an offer. It was the utmost to be expected.

"Your friendship is as pure jade," he assured the old man. "Now give me your advice on one point, my friend! Which of all the men at the palace is most dangerous?"

Hang La blinked and then grinned a little.

"Contrary to general opinion, the man who has least to lose is most dangerous," he said thoughtfully. "Others may have wealth or position or indulgences. He may have none of these. He may not have even a future—but he has life. Having only this one thing, he values it above all else. Whoever interferes with him, therefore, finds a desperate and reckless antagonist."

Brundage knew who was meant here. He had not considered Onderdonk any too seriously, but now he took thought, since he had a high respect for the opinions of Hang La. If this man were named as the most dangerous in the palace, then it was fact. Onderdonk, however, was away in the hills, doubtless inspecting some mining properties, since his share in the government was that of economics.

"And of those who remain here?" asked Brundage.

Hang La reached for a large cheroot and lighted it.

"Who could choose? Each," he said bluntly, "is more to be feared than you. I know because I have seen them all in action."

"But you've not seen me in action," and Brundage smiled slightly. He looked at his watch. "It's not too late to go on to the palace now—and better to do so. They'd know if I spent the night here."

Ten minutes later, he was gone, much to the relief of Hang La.

BEING thoroughly conversant with the place, Brundage knew that the sultan would be playing bridge or billiards with his white advisers, making believe he was civilized, and would be in an amiable mood. Not that it mattered in the least; Sultan Ibrahim was quite a negligible quantity in his scheme of things. The other men were the ones who mattered. Hence Brundage knew exactly what he was going to do and say.

So, though it was evening, he was taken from the gates to the palace itself by an officer, a strutting, dish-faced little monkey-man, and at the palace was ushered on to the billiard room. The sultan was there, playing billiards with the ponderous Vanderhout, while Hajji Ishak sat in the corner and told the beads of his rosary. As Brundage entered, the sultan put down his cue and advanced with well-assumed cordiality, hand outstretched. Ibrahim liked to play at hail-fellow-well-met.

"Welcome, Mynheer Brundage!" he exclaimed. "We thought you were leaving—it's good to see you again, I assure you!"

Brundage made commonplace response, then accepted the huge paw Vanderhout thrust at him and returned the greeting of the laughing Dutchman. He then gave the sultan a glance.

"May I have a word with your highness?"

"By all means," said the little sultan, his brown features well masked. "Vanderhout, will you excuse us a moment?"

Vanderhout chuckled deeply. "I'll run away, your highness—you've beaten me anyway. Don't take a cue with him, Brundage! He's a fiend with the balls. I think Hajji Ishak puts the evil eye on them whenever I shoot."

The fat man moved out of the billiard room. Hajji Ishak sat looking on in silence, but now he left his rosary alone and his hand was close to the saber hilt. Brundage came close to the sultan, when the door closed, and spoke in a low voice.

"Your highness, may I be your guest for some little time?"

"Eh?" Ibrahim started, looked at him keenly, eye to eye. The silence was heavy with conflict, with opposing natures; the two men, little and big, were at extremes of character and human nature. Neither could hope to understand the other. There was no common ground of meeting. The dish-faced little Malay in his tailored evening attire, the big roughly-dressed American, were at opposite poles. One read it in their very eyes—smoldering hot fires in the one, icy imperturbability in the other.

"Eh? My guest?" Ibrahim could not conceal his astonishment. "May I ask why?"

"Certainly," replied Brundage. "I intend to see that no harm comes to Miss Hampton while she is here, and I mean to take her away as soon as she is ready to go."

The sultan laughed slightly. "My dear sir! What harm—"

"Come! No words," snapped Brundage, but very calmly. "I know why you got her here; I know all about it. You're checkmated, Ibrahim, so yield gracefully. And do not forget about those two Frenchmen and the diamond—"

The sultan made a gesture. "My dear Mynheer Brundage, it will give me infinite pleasure to have you as my guest, as long as you wish to stay! You have dined—yes? Then, Ishak," and he turned to the Arab, "let this friend of mine be taken to a guest chamber. Let his will be even as my own in this place; for his safety, your own life shall make answer to me. Do you understand?"

The tall Arab, now on his feet, salaamed deeply.

"Oh jewel in the shield of Allah, thy slave understands and obeys!" he murmured in Malay.

The sultan looked at Brundage.

"Perhaps," he said, an odd wistful tinge to his manner, "perhaps when you have washed and refreshed yourself, you will return and join me in a string of billiards? After all, there is something very pleasant in dealing with an honest man, whether he be friend or—or adversary!"

Brundage nodded. He had infinitely more respect for this little Malay, with eyes of fire and tears, than for any one else about the place.

"I'll be right back, your highness," he said, and moved off in company with the Arab.

His thoughts were all with Vanderhout. He wondered when that fat man would act.

IV

BRUNDAGE went out to the stables after breakfast, to get a horse for a morning trot. He knew now exactly where he stood. Sultan Ibrahim would hold aloof, would do nothing, unless possibly through Hajji Ishak. Any conflict would come through others, and when Brundage saw Hoffman picking out two horses, he knew it was imminent. Therefore, he did not wait for the attack to be brought to him.

"Hello, there!" said Hoffman, hitting boot with riding-crop. "Heard you were here. I'm taking Miss Hampton for a canter. Care to come along?"

Brundage smiled into the deep-set eyes.

"You're not taking Miss Hampton," he said. "I am. Want to come to an issue over it?"

Now, Hoffman was officially in charge here—the resident, whose word was law. His hard jaw set harder still as he stared at Brundage.

"Are you drunk? What do you mean?" he asked at length, in a low voice.

"You know. Want me to spit it out before all the syces?"

It was a bitter pill for Hoffman to swallow, since he dared not let Brundage speak out flatly, and knew Brundage would do just that. This little affair of Marjorie Hampton would raise the devil if brought to the attention of the Colonial authorities; once it was all over, of course, nothing would matter, but the present stage was a ticklish one. And Brundage was not a man to be cowed out, bought out or bluffed out.

"You know what'll happen if you try to see this through?" said Hoffman, attempting no evasion. Brundage smiled again.

"I know what you think will happen," he said quietly. "We'll see. How about it?"

Hoffman's eyes blazed. "All right. It's your chukker."

Hoffman had played polo. He strode off with lithe, confident step, decision in his air. Brundage spoke to the head syce, mounted, took the girl's horse and rode around to the side entrance of the palace. Marjorie Hampton was waiting there in her riding habit. Her eyes opened wide at sight of Brundage.

"You!" she exclaimed. "Where is Mr. Hoffman?"

"Good morning." Brundage shook hands gravely. "Hoffman isn't coming. Never mind the syce—I'll put you up. There! Have you seen the spring of three devils? Then we'll ride that way. Fine place, well worth the trip."

"I must be back at ten-thirty," she exclaimed.

"You'll be back."

"But—what are you doing here, if I may ask?"

"I'm Ibrahim's guest for a little while. Taking a vacation. You're looking fit. Are things to your liking?"

"Yes," she said in a low voice, giving him a quick sideways look. "Just one thing, please! You're not here—to interfere?"

Brundage's brows lifted. "Certainly not! That is, until you call on me. Have you got what you were after?"

Surprise swept her face, settled in dumb amazement. At length she replied.

"What—how do you mean? What I was after—"

Brundage swept his hand through the air as though brushing aside some filmy stuff. They were out the gates now, and heading for the hills.

"I've thought things over a good deal since seeing you in Port Santur," he said calmly. "Sorry I made a fool of myself there—I get hot-headed at times. A girl like you, now, in such a position as this, means something. I don't pretend to understand what's behind it all, and I'm not asking. I've come to the conclusion that you came here for a purpose, and when it's fulfilled, you'll be ready to leave. All right—I'll wait. When you want to leave, you'll need help pretty badly, you know."

She made no response. Her eyes were troubled, her face was set in lines of thoughtful anxiety, as though his words gave food for deep reflection. Brundage quietly dismissed the subject and devoted himself to showing her the hill-country. Nor was there any further reference to her affairs until they had returned, and she had dismounted, and a syce was coming on the run to take the horses. Then, looking up at him, she smiled in her baffling fashion and spoke.

"I won't pretend, Mr. Brundage. I'm glad you came. In a few days, now, I'll be ready to go away—and I may need you. I had expected to call on Mr. Hoffman, but don't think I shall do so. I have to make up my mind about what to do—"

"I don't think you'd better call on Hoffman," said Brundage grimly.

She was gone with a nod.

Just what she meant by her odd words, Brundage could not guess, and did not try. He knew his conjecture was right—she was here for some purpose. She was not the mere plaything of fate the men had first thought her. Realizing this, Brundage now faced the issue squarely.

If she were not a dupe, not an obstinate, flitter-headed girl caught in a trap, had he any business hanging on here? If she were willing, as now seemed, to pit herself against all and sundry for some obscure purpose, was it any business of his? Brundage wanted very badly to get away on his own affairs to San Francisco, and the temptation hit him hard at this point.

Of course, there was his promise to the girl, her understanding that she could call on him for help. This was something—not too much. There was the fact that she was a woman who certainly might need help to get away. This was something, too. None the less, Brundage wrestled with himself in the throes of doubt, until the noon meal, the Dutch rijstaafel. Then, when he joined Hoffman and Vanderhout, the three white men dining together, his doubts were resolved and things came clear again.

THE two were very polite. Vanderhout was jovial, Hoffman curiously unresentful; yet the gauntlet had been thrown down and accepted. Brundage knew now he could not back out—the issue really lay between himself and all these others. All of them! Gaunt old Hajji Ishak, and Onderdonk up in the hills, too. And, very possibly, the sultan's cook. Therefore, Brundage ate nothing that did not come from a common dish. Poison might be tried, but the only certainty was that swift action would come from some quarter.

Brundage was not prepared for the table-talk at dinner that night, however. It concerned a Miss Simkins, who had come as a governess the preceding year. Vanderhout and Hoffman reminisced about her most feelingly; she had died, apparently of fever and homesickness. Behind the thin smile of Hoffman and the chuckle of Vanderhout could be read many unclean things, but Brundage gave no sign that he discerned the attack leveled at him. He was not to be flung off balance so easily, nor would he come down to innuendoes; anything said would have to be flat-footed and open.

Vanderhout, in reality a very clever man, waited after Hoffman went to arrange a bridge game with the sultan. He lighted a cigaret and his little pig eyes rested on Brundage.

"Mynheer," he said thoughtfully, "I have always been fond of you. I think we can speak plainly without losing our tempers."

"I can," and Brundage smiled a little. "Can you?"

"Perhaps," Vanderhout puffed at his cigaret. "That girl, now. I happen to know she was warned at Singapore by some Englishman; he wrote Hoffman about it afterward. She knew what she would find here. You are an idealist, but I'm an old fool, and I know better. I can tell you this girl can feather her nest well, and means to do it. She hinted to Hoffman the other day that she meant to get a good round sum out of Ibrahim, and might want his help."

Brundage said nothing. He rather believed Vanderhout told the truth here.

"Well," went on the Dutchman, "Ibrahim will settle fifty thousand guilders on her, and some very good jewels. What more can any one ask? If I were you, I'd not venture a thankless interference. Will you accept the advice from an old man who likes you?"

"I thank you for it," said Brundage, and waited a moment. From another man, this utterly matter-of-fact gross materialism would have angered him, but he knew Vanderhout spoke frankly and from the heart. "I'm rather sorry we're on opposite sides."

The little pig eyes changed, became bitterly dangerous.

"So, then! I'm sorry, too. Well, that's all." Vanderhout rose. "Shall we run along and get the rubber going? Look out for Ibrahim's bidding—he invariably doubles as a sporting chance, regardless of his cards—"

The bridge game was spirited, and ended with Hoffman the only loser, which put him in a vicious temper.

BRUNDAGE had seen nothing of Miss Hampton since the morning ride. He was more worried by what Vanderhout had said than he cared to admit, for he knew already the girl had thought of getting help from Hoffman. Was she really in this game for money? In that event, he himself had no business in helping her to loot Sultan Ibrahim. The possibilities began to look rather ugly.

Upon reaching his own room that night, Brundage saw a plain envelope lying on his dresser. Opening it, he found an ordinary Chinese visiting card, upon which had been brushed a line of characters he could not read—some dialect. He comprehended at once this was the passage-ticket promised him by Hang La. How it had come here was not a thing to be gone into lightly, and he let the query pass. No matter about that; the point was, Hang La had kept his promise. Then, turning over the card, Brundage found two English words penciled:

Friday night

Clear enough. The junk named *Wave-subduing Moonlight* would arrive at Port Santur earlier than had been expected—on Friday night, and this was Tuesday! Three more days. Would the girl be ready by then? It meant getting away from the palace early, shortly after dark. The road must be covered on foot. The junk would probably sail at dawn, if the tide were right—not until day fully broke, in any case.

With a shrug, Brundage folded the precious red paper and put it away in an inside pocket of his white shirt. Then he removed the shirt and laid it aside until Friday.

When his breakfast came next morning, he despatched a note to Miss Hampton, asking her to be ready for a ride in half an hour. He found her waiting for him, and a syce brought up the horses without orders; the note had obviously been read en route. In her brief greeting he read a certain tenseness, a swift anxiety, but made no comment. Neither of them spoke until the palace and village were behind, and they were heading along the avenue of great casuarina trees leading to the hills.

"Well?" asked Brundage. "Trouble?"

"No, and yes." She laughed, nervously. He saw that she was gripped by emotion. "I've got what I came here for, Mr. Brundage—that is, part of it. And now I must take the action I had contemplated—and it isn't easy. It had always looked so simple! But when one is on the ground and facing realities, things are very different."

Brundage pondered over this solemnly.

"Hm! I suppose so," he returned. "By the way, there's just one method open to us of getting out of here. A Chinese junk will call at Port Santur Friday night, taking us on to Malacca, where you'll be safe in British territory. Are you figuring on looting the sultan's treasure?"

"Something like that, yes," she said, to his astonishment. "I know you don't understand, but I don't feel like asking for help yet—I want to carry this through on my own, as far as I can do it. I've asked the sultan for an interview tonight, and I'm to see him at nine o'clock. Could you be present?"

"Yes," said Brundage.

"Tell me something, please." As she spoke, Brundage saw her face assume firmer lines, and her eyes were reflective. "How long has Hoffman been here?"

"One year under-resident, two years as resident."

"And Vanderhout?"

"Four years here, and about fifteen in this part of Sumatra."

"And Onderdonk?"

"Let's see—about five months, I believe. He was transferred here from Celebes."

"So that explains it!" she exclaimed. Then she felt beneath her tunic and pulled out an envelope, which she handed over to

Brundage. "Read that this afternoon, will you? And if anything happens to me, see that it gets home. It will explain everything to you, so you'll understand what I'm going to do tonight."

He nodded and pocketed the envelope. The girl laughed softly.

"Thank you! Now—let's ride and forget our troubles!"

Brundage shrugged.

V

IT WAS very hot, this Wednesday afternoon. Even the tree-shaded reaches of the palace grounds, usually touched by some faint breeze, were blazing and listless. The sun smote down with suffocating whiteness, and oddly enough reminded Brundage of the same queer suffocating feeling that comes with thick snow. Snow! He laughed at thought of such a thing, as he strode toward the building occupied by Vanderhout, in one corner of the grounds.

More and more, as time passed, he had thought of Hang La's estimate, so that his mind had come to dwell with reflective anticipation upon Onderdonk, up in the hills. The others here were bad enough, thought Brundage, but he'd best them somehow; he was none too sure about Hajji Ishak, though he thought the sultan would hold off for very fear; but Onderdonk grew in importance. Perhaps the man would not return before Friday night, though.

"If not, all right," thought Brundage. "And why did she want to know how long each of these three had been here? To make sure, of course. Onderdonk—can she dream of trusting to him for help, as she was about to trust Hoffman? Perhaps. He wasn't there last year, had no connection with that ugly business of the Simkins woman—"

He paused, as a tall white shape slipped across the sunlight to one side and vanished again. Hajji Ishak going about some errand, wearing the curved scimitar that girded him when he was in attendance on the sultan.

Brundage stared after the lean shape, and frowned. After all, what was certain in this unreal nook of the world among the hills? One could not plan, one could count on nothing. Only the unexpected could happen. Just as the letter written by Marjorie Hampton had been totally unexpected to him, staggering him with its revelations.

Then, too, this request that he come to see Vanderhout after the siesta hour—a request negligently made over the noon meal, low-voiced, that the others might not hear. A hint of mystery? Well; the hot insufferable sunlight made all things prosaic. Vanderhout would not go to any desperate ends—probably wanted to try persuasion or bribery. Well enough! It suited Brundage to kill time, until tonight. Now that he knew what manner of game was being played, now that all things were clear to him, he could take care of himself. Yet what an amazing creature, this English girl—what a passion for independence, for doing it all by herself! Admiration surged anew in him, as he mounted the steps of Vanderhout's bungalow. How little he had known her—how little these other men knew her! And just now, they were going forward to a fine awakening!

Brundage was smiling a little at this thought, when Vanderhout admitted him in person with a cordial greeting. He was ushered into a large, cool chamber, half office, half luxurious salon, where the lattices were drawn.

"Now a drink," said the fat Dutchman. "I have waited until you came—here is some ginger beer, which I do not like, but I shall share it with you none the less, eh?"

Brundage lighted a cigaret and waited. Vanderhout opened the ginger beer, filled a shaker with ice and squareface and the gingery drink, and grinned widely as he shook it up.

"Hoffman has gone for a ride—alone," he observed. "He will come home a little richer; he usually does. Now, what good can money do except to provide comfort? I do not like these hoarders, who save against the morrow. It is much better to enjoy today, before we die!"

He poured the drinks, preened his little mustache, lifted his glass. Brundage sipped the beverage, still silent. Vanderhout chuckled.

"If I had desired—just to rub a few leaves inside the glass. Eh? Well, I am not a poisoner. I asked you here in order to tell you something important."

"Yes?" said Brundage.

The Dutchman reached out to a small, wide box of ebony and brass. He opened it and plucked forth a cheroot. Then he pushed the box at Brundage.

"Some of Ibrahim's special make, a very fine blend. Hm! This is a delicate matter—"

He paused, turned, stared frowningly at his desk. Brundage was in no hurry; he put his cigaret into an ash-tray, picked up one of the cheroots. Vanderhout sighed, roused himself, struck a match and held it out to Brundage, then lighted his own long, whitish cheroot from the same match.

"I've taken thought," he said reflectively, puffing out great clouds of tobacco as he spoke. "I do not think it would be wise for me to become at all active in this matter. I am a selfish old man, and I like comfort—I do not pretend to any altruistic motives, you see! To put it bluntly, since you have interested yourself in this affair, I believe it will not end without some one getting hurt—perhaps without some noise in the world. And so I wanted to let you know that I capitulate."

Brundage smiled slightly. The cheroot was indeed excellent, and if he were surprised at the cordiality of this reception, he did not show it. He smoked in silence, not thinking of his cheroot but of Vanderhout. The old rascal was clever; what lay behind all this? It was some game, of course. Brundage watched him, gray eyes narrowed and alert.

"You think I am lying?" The Dutchman turned abruptly and glared at Brundage, cheroot gripped in one corner of his mouth, smoke bellowing forth with every word.

"I would not put it quite so bluntly," said Brundage.

The other chuckled, smoothed his shiny pate with one hand, let ripples of mirth run across his fat countenance. All the while, he smoked hard.

"You are frank, eh? Well, I can not blame you. Let me tell you why I gave in."

He talked, using many words yet saying very little; he had become garrulous, and ran along endlessly on the subject of wanting to avoid trouble. All the while Brundage searched some sort of clue, puzzled and vigilant. He began sharply to suspect some trap, yet he could pitch upon nothing. A servant came with ice, and Vanderhout turned on him angrily.

"Bring nothing! Give orders no one is to disturb me until I call—no one! Go!"

The man went. Vanderhout swung around and puffed again, and went on talking.

Suddenly Brundage had it. Usually the fat Dutchman smoked leisurely, with enjoyment—this heavy puffing was unnatural. Why? The smoke was pungent, aromatic, rich. Idly, Brundage took the cheroot from his mouth, held it poised as though intent upon the other's words; the thin trickle of ascending smoke reached his nostrils. At the same instant he became conscious of a slight mental incapacity—as it were, a gap. Yet the odd odor of his cheroot now reached his palate, distinct from the blue smoke all around.

A few moments more—perhaps a minute more!

Brundage carefully put the cheroot between his teeth again, and as carefully did all his breathing through his nose. He exhaled through the cheroot, thus giving vent to a cloud of smoke that had not entered his mouth. Then he relaxed in his chair and listened.

After a little he took out the cheroot and broke in abruptly on the flow of words.

"I don't feel—why, what's the matter? Things look queer—"

Brundage's hand fell, and the cheroot rolled on the floor. Vanderhout carefully put a large foot upon it and extinguished the sparks. Then he looked up, regarded Brundage with a slow smile, and asked a question.

"You are not well?"

"I—no, not at all—my brain—doesn't work—"

BRUNDAGE'S head fell forward, his eyes closed. Vanderhout chuckled and watched him for a moment.

"Well," he observed at length, with a sigh, "I am sorry you would have it so! But those who would fight must take the consequences. And now you become a naked brown coolie and go to the mines, and slave out your life! A hard fate for such as you; but better you than me."

With this philosophic reflection, Vanderhout swung his chair about and faced his desk. He reached for some papers, then chuckled again.

"So! You will be a little mad for two or three days, then you will gradually come to yourself. Too late! It is always too late, eh?"

Vanderhout leaned forward, dipped pen in ink, and began to sign the papers.

Behind him, silent as a shadow, Brundage lifted his head, opened his eyes, looked at the ponderous bowed shoulders of the Dutchman. A glimmer of ironic amusement flickered in those gray eyes of his. He lifted his hand, gathered his muscles, brought his body forward—then, swift as light, flung out hand and body. The outer edge of his hand struck the nape of the fat neck, squarely athwart.

Vanderhout's head fell forward on the desk, the pen fell from his fingers, his body became limp and relaxed. This one blow, in such a spot, had momentarily paralyzed him.

With rapidity, Brundage knotted his handkerchief to that of his victim, and tied the man's wrists behind his back. Then he turned to the brass and ebony box, examined the cheroots attentively, nodded to himself, and selected one. He poured himself a drink, lighted a cigaret, and waited.

Presently Vanderhout stirred, heaved his bulk, lifted himself. He swung his chair around slightly until he met the amused gaze of Brundage, who held a pistol negligently. The face of Vanderhout slowly paled and became ashen.

"Better you than me," said Brundage mockingly. "Those who would fight must take the consequences. I would be delighted to shoot you, Vanderhout; instead, I'll ask you to smoke this cheroot. If it's not doped with your infernal native herbs, you get off lightly. If it is, then you'll be out of the way for two or three days—out of harm's way, I should say! Now, let us have no noise. I shall shoot first and explain afterward. Very clever little trap of yours, I must confess—very cleverly done! Here you are."

He leaned forward, offering the cheroot. Vanderhout's face purpled again.

"I will not!" he snapped. "Do you know that I can call—"

"But you'll not," said Brundage. "Come, consider! I shall certainly put a bullet through your rotten heart. On the other hand, you'll be out of it, with nothing very bad. One way, you lose everything. The other, you'll be out of danger for a while! Take your choice. You're too clever a man to argue about it, I trust."

True enough, Vanderhout perceived instantly that he had lost the game beyond recall, and in the eyes of Brundage he read only too clearly that he was not dealing with any weakling. And being a good player, the man took his medicine.

"Very well," he said. "But—this means your finish."

Brundage only smiled and held out the cheroot. Vanderhout took it between his teeth, pallor crept again into his visage, but he puffed as Brundage held a match. Then he settled back in his chair.

Ten minutes afterward, Brundage leaned forward and put his foot upon the glowing tip of the fallen cheroot—exactly as Vanderhout had done previously.

He loosened the limp wrists of his unconscious victim, let the heavy body sag in the chair, then straightened up. Sudden alarm gripped him; he felt a deadly inertia, knew a swift horrible need for the open air. Now he realized why Vanerdhout had created that screen of smoke—the drug worked by virtue of its own aroma, poisoned a whole room!

The tang of it in his lungs, seizing at his brain, Brundage staggered to the doorway. He stood outside for a moment, gasping in the fresh hot air, then remembered his helmet and forced himself to go back after it, despite his loathing of the room. He looked at Vanderhout; well, the man was out of this game now, out of things for the next day or two!

Brundage got into the open air again, somehow, desperately battling off the acute lethargy of his brain, fighting to keep himself alert and in hand. He could scarcely do it. Twice he staggered and had to halt, grimly resolved not to go down, summoning up every atom of energy and will force to keep himself going ahead.

After a time he came to his own quarters. He was vaguely conscious of meeting Hajji Ishak, read the questioning of those two-colored eyes, saw the thin smile on the lean hawk-face of the Hazrami. No matter. He won to his own room again, locked the door, and then fell across his bed.

When Brundage wakened, it was darkening into evening; a servant was at his door, announcing dinner. He called response, forced himself up, drove himself into action. While he dressed, he remembered that this was Wednesday night—Marjorie Hampton wanted him at that interview with the sultan at nine o'clock, after dinner!

He groaned a little. Recalling the girl's letter, he placed it with Hang La's card, glancing over its pages again before pinning it securely in his other shirt. He doused his head with tepid water, trying desperately to clear his brain, but it was still half fogged. And tonight of all times, with the girl depending on him to stand by!

When he joined Hoffman at dinner, one glance at the lantern-jawed young Dutchman was enough. The man knew.

"Where's Vanderhout?" he asked. Hoffman regarded him, narrow-eyed, appraising.

"Laid up."

Hoffman wanted to ask a question, yet hesitated. Brundage forced himself to the attack. Naturally, the sultan had informed him of the interview.

"No bridge tonight, then. Billiards?"

Hoffman shook his head. "No. Business."

"Business all around," said Brundage. "You'll have a surprise."

"So?" observed Hoffman. "You know?"

"More than you," returned Brundage. "May be a bit unpleasant for you, I'm afraid; but it'd be still more unpleasant if you pulled wires and called off the interview."

The deep eyes widened slightly. A hit! Brundage smiled.

"Better send for Onderdonk," he said. "You may need him."

"I think not," said Hoffman cryptically, and then held his peace.

Brundage, too, said no more; the brief effort at concentration had wearied him, fagged him enormously. Hoffman meant to wait and see what the girl had in mind, and with this Brundage was quite content. Much would depend on Sultan Ibrahim, but knowing his natives, Brundage had no confidence in the event; the sultan, he felt certain, would turn to active enmity.

What matter? It was the girl's game—let her play it.

VI

IT WAS curious, that interview—queer things about it impressed Brundage, in his present mental condition, which ordinarily he might have passed by.

It took place in the palace library, a European room, and Ibrahim wore dinner clothes, thus showing he did not anticipate anything unusual. Had he expected trouble, he would have stuck to native costume, since this would have put him at his ease and kept his brain alert. Beside him, as usual, stood Hajji Ishak, his white garments belted with a golden girdle that carried his sword—a curved scimitar in a sheath of ebony, its hilt of old yellow ivory studded with smooth-worn coral knobs. This Arab swordsman might be an anachronism, but he was none the less dangerous.

Hoffman, sprawled comfortably in an armchair, chatted with the sultan, and Brundage said little. Both men rose when the girl was announced. At her entry, a sudden light came into the brown dish-face of the Sultan Ibrahim, and then he also rose.

"Good evening, Miss Hampton!" he exclaimed, cordially. "I am about to have coffee served, and if you will join us—"

"Thank you, not now," she returned as he paused. She was looking a little pale, thought Brundage, yet perfectly controlled. Knowing what was coming, he marveled at her absolute poise.

There was brief silence. Somewhere a clock ticked loudly. Hoffman, standing beside his chair, his cheroot forgotten, watched the girl with hawk-like gaze, tensed and waiting. Brundage watched her, endeavoring to keep his faculties clear and sharp by concentrating on her peril. Hajji Ishak watched her, and fingered his sword-hilt furtively, his lean brown features drawn taut. Tension all around him, the sultan lost his smile, looked irresolutely at the girl.

"Yes?" he said. "You want to talk with me? In private?"

"No. I asked Mr. Brundage to be here," she replied. "It's quite a little story, and it may be unpleasant, but I think you really should listen to it, your highness."

"With pleasure." The sultan looked somewhat at a loss, and sat down. "A chair, Miss Hampton—please do not stand."

"Thank you." Composedly, she seated herself. "It's about my predecessor here, who called herself Miss Simkins. That was not really her name, you know."

The slight touch of irony in those last words drove deep. Sultan Ibrahim frowned at the name, then he looked astonished and confused. This slender, cool-eyed English girl was not at all helpless, not at all in his power, and he was distinctly ill at ease before her. Hoffman started slightly and stared at her, intent on her words.

"Perhaps you did not know so much about her," went on Miss Hampton. She showed a little roll of thin paper in her hand.

"Shall I tell you her story? She was one of a large family, fatherless, impoverished. She read in an advertisement that a governess was wanted out here; the advance pay offered would be a godsend to her mother and sisters. So she changed her name, took the position, and came. You know what happened after she got here."

They knew. Hoffman moved uneasily. Sultan Ibrahim nodded, and wrinkled up his monkey-face in a semblance of compassion.

"Yes, very sad," he said. "We did what we could for her—"

The girl smiled, and before her eyes his words died out.

"Yes, you did what you could," she repeated. "She wrote out all you did for her, your highness—you, and Mynheer Hoffman here, and Mynheer Vanderhout. She wrote out how she was drugged, how she appealed to this man Hoffman, to Vanderhout, how they laughed at her. She wrote out everything that took place, the shame, the insults, the treachery, up to the very day of her death. Mr. Brundage, please take care of these papers."

She held out the roll, and Brundage took it, pocketed it.

Hoffman's face was slowly drained of color. Sultan Ibrahim shook his head blankly.

"I do not know what you are talking about," he said. "There were no insults—and how could she have written such things? She sent off no letters."

"No—you saw to that," said the girl, and he squirmed a little. "But she had a Bible with a hidden pocket in the binding, and she put the papers there. Her name was Hampton, and she was my sister. Now you know why I came here, your highness."

It broke on them suddenly, with calm abruptness, and Brundage smiled to himself at the effect of her words.

Hoffman's gray, cavernous visage had become streaked with sweat that glinted dully in the subdued light, and his deep eyes held a horrible light of realization; one could fairly see the stark thoughts rioting in his brain. These few words threatened him with absolute wreck and ruin. Exposure and disgrace meant that he would be stripped—that all he had garnered with such bitter pains would be snatched out of his clutch. The roll of thin paper in Brundage's pocket would do it, and the prospect horrified him.

Sultan Ibrahim evinced no such emotion, naturally enough. He had nothing to fear and was untouched by any dread. His uneasiness, however, became actual perturbation. Behind the steady calmness of the girl, he read scorn and enmity; in the smile of Brundage, he read contempt and ridicule. These things lashed him more than any fear could have done. At the same time, he realized it was a bad mess, and his instinct was to get out of it quickly as possible at any cost.

"I think there is some mistake," he began.

"There is none," broke in the voice of Brundage, regardless of etiquette. The curt words fell like a hammer-blow, and smashed all the defenses of the sultan, smashed all his ready lies and evasion. He peered at Brundage, then looked back at the girl.

"Well," he said petulantly, "well, then, what do you want? You did not come here to be a governess, then?"

"No, I did not—I came to find out about the fate of my sister, and I have succeeded. And you are going to pay."

She regarded him calmly, level assurance in eyes and voice. Sultan Ibrahim squirmed under this glance; he was lashed to the very soul in his Muslim's pride by thus being faced down by a woman—yet he was helpless. He glanced to Hoffman for guidance, and Hoffman stood mute, obviously recovering from blank consternation. This startled the sultan anew.

"I—this—it's ridiculous," he said, half rising. "The interview is ended."

"Very well," said Brundage, his heavy voice again striking its hammer-like blow. "Then we go to Batavia, to the Government. Take your choice."

The sultan relaxed in his big chair. He gave Brundage one viperish look.

"So this is why you're here? You'll be sorry," he snapped. "All right. What do you want? What must I do?"

No fight in him, of course—Brundage had expected this attitude. The danger would come afterward, from such a man. For the moment, Ibrahim wanted only to get rid of this bother, and of the girl.

"You must pay," she said quietly.

"Very well, very well," he returned. "How much do you want?"

"Perhaps you misunderstand," she said gently, watching him with that peculiar baffling smile half visible. "This is not blackmail. None of your money will go to me. It will go to my mother and two younger sisters—and they will not know how it came to them; that would be too bitter! Yet it is only just that you should pay."

"How much?" he reiterated dully, a spark of impatience in his eyes.

"Five thousand English pounds."

Anger glimmered in his face, but vanished again. It was a large sum for this little hill sultan; yet he could well enough manage it.

"I will pay," he said. "Are you satisfied?"

"Hardly," struck in Brundage, as the girl hesitated. He perceived she was not quite sure of what should come next, and took the situation into his own hands. "We should like a bill on the Government, approved by Mynheer Hoffman, the resident."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Hoffman sharply. Brundage turned and looked at him.

"Impossible? Think!"

Hoffman met the tacit menace of eye and word with the firmness of desperation

"Don't you see? There must be a strict accounting, an explanation—"

"That's your affair," said Brundage coldly. "Sweat over it!"

Hoffman stood like an image for a moment, his nostrils quivering slightly. Then he drew a deep breath and nodded, as though recognizing the inevitability of his assent.

"Very well."

All this while Hajji Ishak had stood frowning, understanding little of the English that was spoken, yet comprehending somewhat of the scene. Now the sultan turned with a word to him, and he departed. Presently writing materials were brought, and Sultan Ibrahim's secretary cunningly brushed out a document in florid Arabic characters. When it was finished, Brundage looked it over, and suggested it be written in Hollandsch as well. Scowling, Hoffman made the copy in his own language, signed and approved them both, and the sultan then appended his own signature and seal.

Watching, Brundage saw the glance exchanged between Ibrahim and Hoffman. As the papers were handed to the girl, he spoke out.

"When is the next boat for the straits?"

Hoffman frowned slightly, but under the drawn brows his eyes flashed exultantly.

"A week from tomorrow."

"Very well—we'll remain until then. Our ride in the morning, Miss Hampton? I'll have the horses ready at the usual hour."

The girl nodded and rose, made her farewells, departed. Brundage lighted a cigaret. He felt more like himself by this time, and began to enjoy the situation.

"By Allah!" said the sultan, with compressed fury. He sat motionless, gripping his chair-arms, his snaky eyes fastened on Brundage. "You have dared too far!"

Brundage laughed.

"Come, your highness! Better take the matter in good humor; you got off lightly enough. Besides, since I'm to be your guest for the next week, better be pleasant about it, eh? You and Mynheer Hoffman both."

"That is true," said Hoffman, so that Ibrahim jerked a look of astonishment at him. "Yes, your highness, it is good advice."

Brundage looked at the resident, and smiled openly. He could read the man's mind like a bit of written parchment. Irresolute, under Hoffman's thumb, the sultan fell silent, yet his bitter eyes spoke volumes.

"You've beaten us," and Hoffman met the gaze of Brundage squarely, almost amusedly. "No doubt about that; and the best thing we can do is to grin and bear it. What about a string of billiards?"

"By all means," said Brundage. Hoffman glanced at Sultan Ibrahim, but that worthy only growled in his throat and shook his head.

THE two white men departed to the billiard-room. Hoffman was cordial, restrained, fully in control of every word, look and act, bearing himself as though the incident were entirely closed. This attitude amused Brundage, but he was careful not to strain it too far. He knew now, in his own mind, that he must kill Hoffman before escape were possible.

When the two men put up their cues and racked the balls away, Hoffman turned quietly.

"So far as I'm concerned," he said, "it's over. But I can't answer for Ibrahim. I can only say—look out! You know what these natives are."

"Thanks," said Brundage. "Good night!"

As he fell asleep, he smiled again at Hoffman's abrupt dropping of enmity—as though it would fool any one! He now knew exactly what to expect, almost to the hour and minute.

When he put Marjorie Hampton into her saddle next morning, she greeted him with her usual cheery smile, but neither spoke until the palace was well behind. Then she turned to him with a grave look.

"Well?"

"Well what?" said Brundage whimsically.

"Ever so much! I want to thank you, too. Shall I ask you for help now?"

He nodded thoughtfully. "I imagine so. You've done your part, played your own game and won it. You didn't lose those papers last night?"

"No." Her fingers went to her throat. "Your question about the boat saved me that. But now I wouldn't know what to do, without you, unless I went to the hotel in Port Santur and waited for the boat."

A hard smile touched the lips of Brundage.

"Of course. They don't know about the junk coming tomorrow night—wouldn't connect us with it in any case! As it stands now, the affair is simple enough, from their view-point. Hoffman will be the first to act; must protect himself. The sultan depends wholly upon him, too, like a child, and won't take any initiative with Hoffman standing by. That's what worries me."

She puckered up her brows. "Eh? It worrries you—what does?"

"What Ibrahim will do after I kill Hoffman."

The color ebbed from her cheeks. "You're not—in earnest? About killing him?"

Brundage gave her a grave, slow look.

"Is this a child's game, young woman?"

"I know; but—but you must not run such risks! They'd not actually hurt me—"

Brundage only laughed, and at the sound of it she fell silent. For a little they rode on without speaking, until she ventured a word.

"Why—why kill anybody?"

"To live," said Brundage simply "Vanderhout made the first try; he failed. He'll not be up and around for a day or two. Hoffman won't try any half-way measure this time. He'll fail. I only hope Onderdonk doesn't get back before tomorrow—I'm afraid of Onderdonk."

"He wasn't here last year," she pointed out.

"He was when you came," said Brundage dryly.

"Then—you will try to get aboard that junk?"

"No try about it—we must do it! We'll go riding at the usual time tomorrow morning, and instead of returning, go straight for Port Santur. We may make it, may not—it all depends. Hoffman will be dead, and Sultan Ibrahim may set that cursed Arab of his on us."

"You seem very sure, about Hoffman, I mean."

Brundage only shrugged to this, and lighted a cheroot. Presently she questioned him.

"Why not go to Port Santur now?"

He gave her a queer look, wondering. She seemed to have no imagination at all, yet he knew better. Odd bundle of contrasts—every woman the same!

"Too dangerous," he said, "Two or three whites there, but rather a bad lot, and all of them together daren't oppose Hoffman. He'd get us tonight sure. I figure that it's much better to let him make his try right here, and settle him. He'll try for me, knowing that you could be handled well enough if I were gone; besides, I'm keeping your sister's letter or whatever it is, and he's afraid of that document. So if all goes well and we light out for the harbor tomorrow, we'll throw 'em all off balance. Before Ibrahim can make any plans, we'll be gone. Fortunately, Onderdonk is in the hills."

A long speech for Brundage.

"Just what do you expect?" asked the girl in a low voice.

"The unexpected. It will have to be Hoffman himself, however—he'd not trust any one else in the job. Have you been in Hang La's bazar?"

"Once or twice."

"Go again some time this morning. Get hold of Hang La himself and make sure about the junk coming tomorrow night. I daren't go near him, for fear they'd suspect the truth."

She nodded comprehension, and presently they headed for home again.

VII

BRUNDAGE encountered Hoffman once or twice that day, and found the man invariably cordial. Vanderhout, it appeared, was ill but would be around in a few days. The sultan kept strictly in seclusion; his pride must have been most bitterly affronted. Brundage observed, however, that Hajji Ishak was always somewhere in sight, and understood that the Hazrami was keeping him under observation.

During the afternoon he sent a palace attendant to Miss Hampton with a note. She met him in the gardens, as he requested, and he detected signs of flurry.

"What's the trouble?"

"Nothing—these women are hateful," she said, and smiled. "I think they've been ordered to make my stay here unendurable. Such childishness! But I have bad news for you, I'm afraid. I saw our friend as you asked. It's all right about the junk—but Onderdonk is in Port Santur and will be here tomorrow or Saturday."

Brundage stiffened a little.

"Oh! Very well. Tomorrow morning at the usual time, then. Don't let any one suspect that we're going to decamp. You'll have to leave everything here—not even a bundle! By the way, take charge of these."

He handed her an envelope, sealed. She turned it over in her hand, then slipped it out of sight, with an inquiring look.

"Your sister's letter. Also, Hang La's card to the skipper of the junk. In case anything goes wrong with me, it'll take care of things for you. There's your letter to me, too. Look out for the envelope tonight—though I don't believe you'll be bothered. They'll wait until I'm out of the way."

Her eyes widened. "But—you don't fear that—that—"

Brundage shrugged. "I can take care of myself. One never knows, however; we might get separated, and the main thing is for you to make that junk. I'm safe enough, but you're not."

He returned to his own rooms, more perturbed than he cared to reveal by this news. Onderdonk in Port Santur! That was bad. Undoubtedly a messenger had already gone to him from Hoffman.

"Looks like a trap all around," thought Brundage, loading and pocketing his pistol as he dressed for dinner. This news had shaken him oddly. More and more he was fearing the absent Onderdonk, for Hang La's words rooted deeper every day, as he realized more clearly his mastery over the others.

He said little at dinner, regarded Hoffman with curious gaze, marveling at how easily he pierced the man's subtle mask, wondering at his own surety of killing Hoffman this same night. Between one and two, he thought to himself.

"I'm getting off some letters to Port Santur in the morning," said Hoffman genially, over the coffee. "Would you like me to order passage for you and Miss Hampton on the mail-boat next week? Even if they're filled up, you know, they'll have to take you aboard at an official request."

"Very good of you, thanks," said Brundage. "If it won't bother you—"

"Nonsense!" Hoffman laughed, then regarded him with an affectation of frankness. "I'm glad to do what I can—to make up, you see. It *was* rather a beastly mess, as the English say; and I'm rather glad things have turned out as they have. I suppose Ibrahim is still sulking in the harem. Shall we have a string?"

They adjourned to the billiard-room, wiled away an hour, then parted for the night. Brundage got an English magazine from the library and took it to bed until he fell asleep over it. He had set his brain to waken him at one o'clock, however.

PRECISELY at one he wakened, got out of bed, slipped his feet into the waiting pumps. The palace was silent, dark. Brundage arranged the "Dutch Wife" bolster in his bed to simulate his own figure, drew the mosquito curtains, and settled down in the depths of a big chair six feet from the bed. Close beside his hand was an electric torch, and his pistol was in his lap.

Time passed. A flying fox barked monotonously in the gardens, and night-birds lifted recurrent voices; it was difficult to remain awake, but Brundage had motive to hold him vigilant. He had purposely left his door unlocked.

Abruptly, he tensed—there was the swift, firm footstep which he had anticipated. None dared question the resident in his comings or goings about the palace grounds, at any hour; Hoffman had no need of stealth. The footstep ceased. In the room stirred a breath of air. Silently the door had opened; now it closed again, invisible, with only the faintest of sounds. Hoffman was here, in the room.

Eyes accustomed to darkness, Brundage could distinctly glimpse the patch of white that was Hoffman, standing motionless against the door. He lifted his pistol, then, as his finger tightened, something suddenly broke in him. Resolution died.

The few seconds seemed an hour, while he struggled with himself, or rather with the singular weakness that had seized upon him. It was not mercy—he regarded Hoffman as a reptile to be snuffed out. It was not fear—he had nothing to be afraid of from the man's death. It was not calculation—he had already weighed the whole thing, had determined that Hoffman's death was necessary to the escape of the girl. Further, the man stood in bitter need of punishment. What, then, held his finger and gripped icily at his brain?

Perhaps it was the will of Marjorie Hampton, flung out blindly at him in the night.

A soft slither of feet on the matting; Hoffman was coming forward to the bed. With a beading of sweat on his face, Brundage laid the pistol in the chair beside him, held ready the electric torch, gathered his muscles. He was used to obeying instinct; if it were instinct telling him not to kill this man, well and good.

Hoffman paused again, and in the silence Brundage caught a soft slithering noise—a knife slipped from its sheath. Then Hoffman leaped. He dove headlong at the bed, ripped aside the flimsy curtains with his weight, plunged his knife down repeatedly.

The beam of the electric torch caught him there, back turned, as he knelt on the bed and stabbed. An instant he was paralyzed by realization, then he straightened and swung about, too swiftly. For, as he swung, the fist of Brundage landed fairly at the angle of his long jaw, under the ear.

No more was needed, Hoffman fell sprawling across the bed and lay there, senseless.

Brundage rubbed his knuckles, numbed by the blow, then stood the electric torch on end so that it illumined the whole room. He picked up the knife, and found it a long native weapon, gold-inlaid, sheathed in shagreen and brass. With it he went to his towel rack, selected a bath-towel, and slit this into long strips. He bound Hoffman wrist and ankle, very firmly, then gagged him efficiently if cruelly, dropped him to the floor, and rolled him beneath the bed, throwing the knife and sheath after him. Then he switched off the light and reflected.

After all, he was inexpressibly relieved that he had not shot the man. Necessary? No—folly, to think Hoffman's death necessary! As for punishment, here was a far keener punishment than death. Hoffman would not be discovered until some time in the afternoon, when the room was made up. To be found here, trussed and gagged, would be a bitter pill for the resident; he would become a laughing stock in native eyes, would be forced to apply for a change of post—his influence would be gone. The knife, the ripped curtains and bedding, would tell their own story, and it would follow wherever he went, a millstone hung about his neck by native tongues.

Brundage put away the pistol, kicked off his pumps, climbed back into bed and went to sleep.

MORNING brought readjustment. The servant who placed his breakfast on the table evidently had received orders to look around, for Brundage caught his sharp glances at the tattered bed-curtains. Hoffman was well out of sight, however, and the man departed. Brundage drew up a chair and attacked his breakfast heartily, knowing he would get nothing more to eat until he reached Port Santur.

He was more than a little pleased with the way things had turned out. The attitude of the servant, however, had shown him that Hoffman was already missed—probably had been seen coming here in the night. They would not wait until afternoon to search, then; but what matter? All Brundage wanted was to get out of here, and over the hill to the sea.

"The best of it is," he reflected, "the rascal doesn't dare use his official position against me! It would be a bit too thick. If the thing came into court, he'd be lost—so he's helpless. Awake, Mynheer Hoffman? Sleep some more, then."

A muffled sound from beneath the bed made response, and Brundage chuckled as he filled a pipe. The main thing, he knew, was to keep the disappearance of Hoffman a mystery until he had gone. Otherwise Sultan Ibrahim would be all too apt to fling his own men into the game in a burst of petulant fury; he might do it anyway, but Brundage hoped not, trusting that indecision and uncertainty would tie his hands.

So he shaved and dressed, whistling blithely, and made ready for his departure. Pistol in jacket pocket, money and papers secure, he glanced at his watch—ten minutes yet. A knock came at the door, and in reply to his command, Hajji Ishak entered.

The gaunt Arab saluted with fingers to brow, lips and breast, his brown and blue eyes darted once around the room, then he spoke to Brundage, in French.

"We are looking for Mr. Hoffman. He has not been here?"

Brundage shrugged. "Perhaps. I woke up half an hour or more ago, and have not seen him since then. Is he lost, then?"

Hajji Ishank touched his sword-hilt significantly.

"By Allah! I have eyes," he muttered in Arabic. He gave a start of astonishment when Brundage flung a snarl at him in his own language.

"Then use them, misbegotten cur! And when you have used them, begone. It is a good saying among the Persians: 'If you meet in your road an adder and a Hazrami, slay the Hazrami.' Let me not meet you in my road, or I shall fling you out into the garden after the thief who came in the night!"

A flicker of rage shook the gaunt brown face, but it was gone at once. Hajji Ishak glanced at the windows, then turned and departed in silence. Obviously, he had gone to seek any trace of Hoffman in the gardens.

BRUNDAGE smiled, yet his smile ended in a frown. The man's insolence showed the peril.

Clearer still it stood revealed when Brundage went to the stables to pick the horses himself, as was his habit. What rumors had flown about, he had no means of telling, but the results were plain enough. The syces were surly, laughing, even insolent—an astounding state of affairs. Brundage could only conclude that they had received direct orders to provoke him if possible, and bring about some fracas which would give Hajji Ishak or the guards cause to intervene.

Therefore he refused to be provoked. Instead—as he later recalled, to his sorrow—he drew out his pistol, inspected it, put it in his pocket again, and selected the best horses to be found. The syces saddled up under his cold eye, and he affected not to hear their comments as they worked. Brundage, in truth, was now in a sweat to be off and away from the palace as swiftly as possible; uneasiness had seized upon him, and the uncertainty of the situation here was most disquieting He would not breathe easily until he had Marjorie Hampton in the saddle and at his side, for it was entirely possible she might be prevented from leaving her rooms.

So he dared not risk any outbreak, but tightened the girths himself, adjusted the stirrups, and nodded to a syce to lead out the horses. The syce obeyed. At the same instant, a sudden commotion arose—a horse came plunging and kicking from his stall with a shrill scream of terror or pain; a white stallion whose hooves were lashing out.

At once the place leaped into pandemonium. Another horse plunged out, men came shouting and running, syces yelled wild oaths. Brundage was caught in a swirl of figures and carried along into a corner, jammed there by a rush of the maddened stallion. A man went down under the flying hooves, and another.

Thinking this some trap, every sense on the alert, Brundage watched for a glint of steel, but none came. The hillmen were thinking only of the white stallion. There was a concerted rush, and he was captured, while Brundage fought clear and hastened after his two horses. He overtook them, mounted, and dismissed the syce, as he took them around to the entrance. He saw Marjorie Hampton standing there, waiting, and a sense of tremendous relief overwhelmed him. All was right, then—

No! Something was wrong, somewhere. He was aware of it, yet could not place it. As he came up to the girl and met her anxious eyes, he saluted smilingly.

"Did—did it happen?" she demanded. He stared at her for an instant, before he remembered Hoffman.

"Oh—that!" He laughed suddenly. "No,

not as I looked for. It happened, but I didn't do him any damage."

"Good! I'm very glad," she exclaimed. He put her up to the saddle, then she twisted about and looked at him. "What's happened? Why, half your coat is gone—"

Brundage clapped hand to side, looked down. He knew now what was wrong. In that press of men, some one had adroitly used a knife after all—not to injure him, but to slice out a bit of his jacket. And in the missing fragment was most of his pocket, with its pistol.

For an instant he stood, impelled to seek the stables and regain his pistol—yet what use? He would never get it back, would never find it. Such action would only cause delay. With a gesture of decision, he swung up into the saddle.

"What's the matter?" she demanded again. Brundage gave her a look.

"They've disarmed me, that's all. Come along! We're away—that's the great thing!"

Five minutes later they were out of the palace grounds. But Brundage, thinking of his lost pistol and how Onderdonk lay ahead of them, moaned to himself.

VIII

PERHAPS the girl divined his thought, for she regarded him a moment, then spoke.

"Hang La?"

"Eh! No." Brundage, a little startled by her acumen, shook his head. "The Dutch are a bit strict with firearms, you know. He'd have nothing, and wouldn't give it to me if he had. No, let it go—we'll win through somehow. Is your envelope all safe?"

"Quite, thanks," she returned cheerfully. "And we're really off for Port Santur?"

Brundage nodded, assumed a confidence he did not feel, and spoke of what lay ahead. In reality he was heavily oppressed, not by the loss of the pistol, but by an indefinable sense of foreboding. He could not forget the cruel face of Hajji Ishak, knowing well of what the Hazrami were capable if once turned loose. And more than all, the fact of Onderdonk being ahead of them in Port Santur, perhaps on his way over the hill this moment!

"You're a fool," he told himself savagely, "to let the loss of a gun knock you out! What good is a pistol, anyhow? Not a bit. It's all in the man holding it. Brace up!"

Just as the palace and town were drowned from sight by the green foliage all around a figure appeared in the road ahead, abruptly leaving the shelter of the trees. A glance showed Brundage that it was a Chinaman, awaiting them. With a word to the girl, he passed on ahead of her, and drew rein. The saffron-faced figure held up a parcel in silence.

"From Hang La?" asked Brundage.

The other noded, turned, and slipped in among the trees again without a word. Opening a corner of the matting-wrapped package, Brundage discovered that the old celestial had sent them food. He was startled by the implication. Hang La, then, had guessed how and when they would leave!

"A wise old man, that Hang La," commented Miss Hampton, and sighed. "I liked him. Well, we have only to stop beside a brook, and we're all right!"

Brundage smiled. "No brooks. However, there's a spring on the hill road, and we'll get to it in a couple of hours if we push on. With the horses, we'll make Port Santur long before dark, and all's well. They'll not dare touch us there. Too open."

So they rode on through the hot morning, and presently came to the empty hill road that wound, dipping, then left jungle behind and mounted through the upper reaches of the forest. And, as they turned into it, Brundage realized that his horse was limping. He made no comment on the discovery, but, five minutes afterward, Miss Hampton leaned over and touched his elbow.

"Look! My horse is lame—and so is yours—"

"I'll look 'em over. Stone in the shoe, perhaps."

He knew better, however—knew it even as he dismounted. Nor had he far to seek. He looked up and met the questioning eyes of the girl.

"Clever rascals, those," he said calmly. "They've cut the poor brutes across the legs—not enough to hamstring them, but enough to get worse every mile. We can get as far as the spring before we have to abandon them, though."

Her gaze widened. "You mean—oh, no! They'd not be so cruel—"

"Evidently we are to be stopped—and followed if we don't return. Keep going."

She refused. "No—I can't do it. Let me look."

She joined him, and drew back. It must have struck her like a blow—less the cruelty than the implication. She had been long enough here to realize what the deliberate ruin of these two expensive beasts meant. Evidently the sultan had given his orders, to be obeyed at any cost.

"They'll last to the spring," said Brundage appraisingly. "Up-hill work, and that means strain on the cuts—what devils! That much of the road is the worst for us, too. After that we can go on afoot, most of it down grade."

"No," she said with quiet resolution. Brundage gave her an angry glance.

"What? Why not?"

"The cruelty of it." Her face was a little white. "They're splendid animals, would work their hearts out for us—I can't do it! Every step would be torture, and when we finished with them they would be done for. I couldn't torture the poor dumb things so—"

Brundage drew a deep breath to keep back an oath. As he stared at her, he wondered how he could have deemed her lacking in imagination.

"Look here, none of this foolishness," he said curtly. "Mount and ride! Everything depends on time—don't you realize we'll be followed? These horses can serve us, can assure our escape. What's death, or worse, when balanced against the suffering of an animal? Anyway, they don't feel as we do. It's all in the day's work for them—"

His words died, before that baffling, strange smile in her eyes.

"I'm not a child, really," she said, putting her head on one side and regarding him curiously.

"For heaven's sake be practical!" he exclaimed, with a sinking perception of her resolute character. He was taken back to his first meeting with her in Port Santur—the girl was like a stone wall. "They planned it this way, so the beasts would give out after a few miles, When we don't come back, they'll pursue us. We'll hardly reach that spring, afoot, before they'll be up with us! You can't be in earnest about this."

"But I am," she said. "Quite in earnest."

There was an instant of silence, as her words sank in, and Brundage faced the hard fact of the situation. Then he mastered himself.

"Very well," he said, and shrugged. "Let's be going."

She rewarded him with a smile, but he ignored it, for his heart was hot at her folly. Turning the horses loose to find their way home, he strode up the path beside her, under his arm their bundle of provisions, and maintained a glum silence.

It was not an easy road, being little more than a track, and quite deserted here in the uplands, where huge trees towered on either side and the jungle gave place to giant ferns or open spaces. At times the track ploughed sharply up a hill flank, other times it dragged through masses of old brush where trees had fallen; and always it was deserted. They met only six men the whole way, and these were porters bearing goods belonging to Hang La, who grinned and went their way past.

Marjorie Hampton questioned in regard to the night's events, and presently Brundage resigned himself to the situation as they talked. After all, it had a grimly humorous side, and with a laugh he gave himself into the hand of fate, dismissed his resentment, and met the girl half-way with a grudging admiration for her adherence to inner convictions.

NOON passed; but here in the mountain uplands the heat was not noticeable. Brundage, who was not a walker, found himself keeping the girl's pace with some difficulty, and was forced to admit they were making very fair time of it. His fear that she would give way, he now saw, was rather ludicrous—he began to fancy she was stronger than he, for all her seeming fragility.

So, early in the afternoon, with no sign of any pursuit, they came to the spring. It was a tiny trickle from the hillside to the right of the road, caught and held in an old basin of unrotting bilian wood, whence it wound off and vanished in the soil. Over it stood great trees, so that the place was thick with deep shade and very inviting. The hillside rose sharply at the rear, and in either direction was a view of the road for a hundred feet, no more.

"Half an hour, no more," said Brundage, flinging himself down beside the spring.

"Drink from the bowl—after you. Then we'll investigate Hang La's farewell offering."

This, when opened, proved better than good. There were rice cakes, a roast fowl, a packet of some rice concoction, and a bottle of rice-wine; staples, yet excellently cooked and put up with care.

"Hang La's a good sort, in his way," said Brundage, dividing the fowl. "And nobody has come after us—perhaps my foresight was amiss. Let's hope so! After all, our troubles may lie in Port Santur, with Onderdonk. He's a bad 'un."

"Is he?" asked the girl. Brundage gave her a puzzled glance.

"You don't seem to think so."

"I never met him," she returned. "I only saw him the first day I came—he bowed and said nothing. His eyes were not nice to look into."

Brundage only grunted at that. With the food and drink, and the high solitude among the hills, he was feeling much more optimistic.

THE half hour was soon spent, and with it the lunch. Three hundred yards on the back trail was a bend, whence one could see the winding road for nearly a mile below, and before they started Brundage wanted a look back. He rose and lighted a cigaret, his last one.

"Make yourself comfortable until I get back," he said. "I'll have a look to make sure no one's coming after us. Then we'll be off. Down-hill the rest of the way."

He strode away, and in two minutes the spring and the figure of Marjorie Hampton were shut from sight. It was no more than a desire to make certainty certain that led Brundage on the back trail. Since Hajji Ishak had not arrived by this time, he was probably not coming at all—fears were vain, anxiety were folly! None the less, one look back on the trail below would make sure.

So, twisting down the hillside, Brundage came to the sharp elbow-bend that looked forth—and there he came to a sudden halt. Thirty feet away from him were three saddle-horses; and standing beside these, watching him, were Hajji Ishak and two small brown hillmen.

Much came to Brundage in this instant of immobility. Sixth sense, more than the attitude of the three men, showed him the truth; one of them had gone forward, had sighted the scene at the spring, had returned to Hajji Ishak with word of it. The hunters had come up with the quarry, and the foam-white horses testified to their hard riding. No doubt, others were now following.

Since it was not his way to await attack, Brundage strode forward at the three.

None of them, he observed, bore rifles. The two Tamils caused him no worry; these, unused to such dealings with whites, were disconcerted by his advance. Hajji Ishak, however, laughed and came to meet him, hand on sword-hilt. For all his seeming boldness, Brundage was playing no rôle of folly; true, desperation spurred him, yet he was neglecting no straw at which he might have to snatch. So, when he halted, he had picked the spot carefully.

"By Allah, infidel, we are well met!" said the swaggering Hazrami in Arabic. "Go and get the woman, and come back with us."

"Who am I, to bandy words with such as you?" said Brundage. Hajji Ishak came close, grinned, and tapped him on the arm.

"Listen! Your life lies in my hand—"

Swift as a flash, Brundage struck, thinking to win the whole game with this one blow.

And he all but won it; would have won it, save that the swordsman's eye of Ishak caught a flicker of warning. His fist crashed against the lean chin, and the Arab was knocked all asprawl—yet the vital point had been missed.

With this, the two Tamils were darting in, knives agleam in the sunlight. Brundage had no chance to follow up his blow, so adder-sharp was their attack, so vicious their swoop from either side. He whirled on one of them, caught the knife-wrist as it thrust, held it hard, and dodged. Not quickly enough—steel bit at him from behind, yet he wrenched clear, saw the other man in the act of striking again, and kicked. His heavy boot smashed squarely into the brown chest, and the man fell backward and lay quiet, vomiting blood.

The little brown figure gripped by the wrist was lashing about desperately, striking futile blows. Hajji Ishak was on his feet now, with a mutter of curses, and his sword swept out and up like a flame. Brundage whirled up his captive, flung him over hip, sent him hurtling headlong at the Arab, who was staggered and flung back a pace.

In this instant of respite, Brundage stooped. A few stones lay there in the road, where he had halted—fist-large, rounded pebbles. He plucked up two of them, and straightened; then pain shot through him from his hurt, and for an instant he could not move. The gaunt Hazrami was leaping in. Far below on the winding stretches of the trail were moving objects—Brundage glimpsed them, knew that other pursuers were coming up, knew himself lost.

The blade swung.

With a sudden effort, Brundage dodged the sweep of it, yet the very tip of the curved sword reached him and slit the jacket and shirt and skin beneath it, so that a foot-long sliver of blood crept out across the white of his chest. A wild exhalation broke from Ishak—a panting incoherent word of exultancy. The scimitar swung again, glittered, swept down.

Brundage was a yard away when it fell, and the stone left his hand as from a sling. It caught the Hazrami squarely between the eyes, full force. Hajji Ishak flung out his arms, and the blade, escaping from his hand, flew up in a long arc and then tinkled on the road and lay there, but no more quietly than its master.

"It's not—the—steel, but—the man!" gasped out Brundage, and laughed as he looked at the dead Arab lying in the sunlight.

A groan escaped him, and he put his hand to his back, and drew it away crimsoned. That knife had left him in bad shape. The user of it still lay writhing in the dust. The second Tamil had gone away, running, darting in among the trees. The three horses stood clumped together, wondering, ears cocked toward the white man.

Brundage stepped toward them, and every movement was agony, yet he forced himself on, for here lay escape, safety, everything! He came to the fallen blade and stooped, with painful effort, then leaned on it for an instant; his head was swimming, his helmet gone. He must have the helmet at all costs, or the sun would be deadly. He went back and recovered it—precious seconds gone—then approached the horses, stumbling as he walked.

He came to them, put hand to saddle, but found himself momentarily helpless. A shout startled him—there, spurring up the trail, was a rider! With a spurt of energy, Brundage gathered himself together, summoned up every force, clambered into the saddle. The sword went, and he let it go. He grasped at the bridle of the horse beside him, caught up the reins of his own pony. A shot smashed out rolling echoes, the bullet whistled close, and at this the two animals were startled into a forward plunge.

Brundage hung on grimly, helplessly, knowing the foremost pursuer within fifty feet, and urged the ponies on up the slope. He was lost now, his only chance that he could get Marjorie Hampton into a saddle and off, while he somehow blocked this first pursuer. He clung to the saddle, reeled, all but pitched off as they swept about a curve. Then for a moment his head cleared.

Closer now, close behind him, was thundering along the foremost rider. A shrill, eager yell went up. Brundage straightened, as ahead opened out the deep trees and the spring, and the slender figure of the girl standing there. He pulled hard on the reins, drew in the ponies—and then a terrible consternation seized him.

For, beneath the trees, stood another horse, and beside the girl a man, in white. And the man was Onderdonk.

Even as he realized this, even as he came toward them and got the horses to a halt, Brundage saw Onderdonk step out into the sunlight, saw the pistol in his hand jerk up, saw the red flame of it, heard the girl's cry. And that was all.

BRUNDAGE realized vaguely that Marjorie Hampton was supporting him with one arm, while she sopped water on the deep cut under his shoulder; but he had no thought for her or himself. His whole amazed brain was out there with the small, spare, lithe figure in the road, ten feet away.

A deadly little man was Onderdonk, as the three motionless figures sprawled in the road bore witness. At each jerk of his pistol-hand, the dozen mounted natives before him drew back; their eagerness was gone, and terror was upon them.

"Now go, and tell your master I come," he said. One of them made answer.

"But it was Mynheer Hoffman—"

"Go!" snapped Onderdonk, and the

cringing brown men turned their horses and went. But three of them remained, huddled heaps.

Onderdonk put away his pistol and came back to the deep shade of the spring. He stood for a moment staring at Brundage, who heard the girl behind him catch her breath.

"Afraid of me, were you?" he said, in Dutch. "Well, we're all fools in this world. Get up, now, and we'll fix your bandage. He's all right, Miss Hampton—he'll be riding along with you in five minutes."

Brundage realized the staggering truth, but could find no words. Presently, he was on his feet, Onderdonk fastening the rags of his shirt and jacket about him. The smaller man met the deep questioning of Brundage's gaze, and shrugged.

"Go your way, and don't be a fool any more," he said. "You may well wonder! Well, when she looked into my eyes and asked me to help—it changed everything. It always changes everything, even for a man like me."

"If," said Brundage heavily, "the man is at bottom—a man."

Onderdonk flashed him a smile at this, and then helped him into the saddle, and turned to Marjorie Hampton. She put out her hand to him, in silence, but her face was eloquent. Onderdonk reddened, then paled, and bent his lips to her fingers. Then, for a moment, he met her gaze—and Brundage, looking down at the man, saw that bitter face, those burning sunken eyes, transfigured. Here was the man that might have been—perhaps the man that might yet be. Why not?

Afterward, looking back, Brundage saw Onderdonk standing there motionless, staring after them, and the flame glowing in his eyes was a thing to remember always.

"Do you remember what I said in Port Santur," said the girl's voice, softly, "about 'the spirit of knowledge and of ghostly strength?' One never knows—"

"No," said Brundage. "One never knows."

Two Extraordinarily Exciting Complete Novelettes will be Published in February

War Along Big Creek

by Charles Wesley Sanders

It is even better than his "Nome Means 'No Women'" in this issue. It is, in fact, a rollicking, racing tale of a feud between two ranch owners, of cattle rustling and of a gang of bad men who get mixed up in the fray.

Men Like Beasts

by Eugene P. Lyle, Jr.

An airship wrecked in the South American jungle, a woman so fascinating that every man is mad about her . . . and then the emergence from the marshes of strange, prehistoric creatures that add horror to a situation already perilous.

Good to the LAST DROP

By

Harry Harrison Kroll

AUNT RACHEL LEVERAGE glared at the judge with a distrust born of close to fifty years of connubial association with that crafty gentleman. She hesitated whether to give him his second cup of coffee, thought better of it, and poured the cream into the cup.

"Wal, all I know air," she said tartly, "you said last summer when I was hoeing in that thar patch of terbacker that if hit turned out a good crop, and the price war right, you'd give me ten dollars to buy me a new iron bed. Now I want that money. Whar air hit?"

"Now, Rachel," placated the old man, "hit air thisser way: I had that note to meet at the bank, and I met hit. Then I owed fur that bill of goods down at Knoxville, so I sent them a check. Then I owed Sid Harkreader—"

"Whut you owe Sid Harkreader fur—likker?"

"Likker?" echoed Uncle Jesse innocently. "Now, maw, you know I hain't been a-buying of no likker—"

The old woman snorted.

"G'wan and tell whur you spent the rest of hit!"

"Wal, that's mostly all," lamely concluded Uncle Jesse. "Them items about taken the pile."

Aunt Rachel made a hasty but accurate calculation.

"That load of terbacker fotched you $208.50. Them bills and notes you named, with whut you laid away in the bank, don't make only $190 and a few cents. Whur air that other $18, I want to know?"

Uncle Jesse, thus driven into a corner, wriggled like a worm in hot ashes.

"Air you right sure you figgered hit right?" He finally saw a chance to delay the issue. "Did you put the figgers down, Sud?"

Sudbury Corson, the boarder, thus appealed to, desisted from the consumption of bacon and eggs and hot biscuits and yellow butter and honey to add his testimony to the threatened domestic inquisition. Up until this point he had addressed his whole attention to his plate, and the elbow maneuvers essential to conveying the contents from the plate to his mouth. There were certain excellent reasons why he should thus maintain a studied neutrality. He was six weeks behind with his board bill, and if he were to become too partisan he might expect to have the scene of battle shift from Uncle Jesse's ground to his own territory.

"Wal, no, I didn't, Uncle Jesse," Sud replied. "I thought Aunt Rachel war 'tending to that part."

"I war!" announced Aunt Rachel with gleaming finality.

"Wal, then, mebby I air wrong about all the money being gone." Uncle Jesse transferred the possible error from his wife's computations to the bank's. "As soon as I git time, I'll ride down to Connersville and see whut that balance air!"

Aunt Rachel sniffed again, but she allowed the matter to rest at this point. The head of the house and delinquent boarder hastily finished the visible supply of food and, wiping their mouths on the face towel above the water shelf in the corner of the kitchen, grabbed their hats and departed.

Once out at the store, Uncle Jesse sat down on a nail keg and fanned himself.

"She shore liked to ketched up with us, didn't she, Sud?"

"She shore did!" panted Sudbury.

"Now, then," resumed Uncle Jesse, returning to a conversation that had been interrupted by the meal, "I bet you fifteen dollars in hard cash that my gander kin whup your game rooster."

"And I kiver that fifteen with fifteen other hard dollars! That gander of your'n may be ever'thing you claim, but—"

"S-h-hhhhh! They hain't no telling who mout be listening! And was *she* to hear you betting fifteen dollars on a game rooster and you owing of six weeks board—and even fifteen hard dollars—you'd lose your money sho' nuff! You do your betting in an undertone!"

Sudbury darted his eyes uneasily about and drew closer to Uncle Jesse.

"That bird of your'n may be a regular catamou't," he repeated, "but all the same my rooster will peck him so full of holes that he'll look like a revenuer after the stillboys have shot him up. You don't know Ab'um Lincoln, Uncle Jesse!"

"Ner you don't know Ulissish S. Grant, neither, by grabs! Ever noticed that old house place right up the road, Sud?" the old man suddenly changed the subject.

Sudbury nodded.

"The house fell down here some thirty odd year ago. You seed the timbers and clapboards lying around till up to a year or so ago, hain't you?"

"Yap."

"Never noticed a bit of iron, or nails, ner stones from the chimbley, did you?"

"Don't know as I ever have, since you mention it, Uncle Jesse."

"That gander of mine et 'em all up!" rejoined Uncle Jesse placidly.

IN SPITE of his faith in the prowess of his game cock, Sudbury Corson suffered pangs of uneasiness over the outcome of the battle dated to come off the following Saturday night at Wilkes' blacksmith shop, in the edge of the cedar glade, a quarter of a mile down the road from Uncle Jesse Leverage's place. If he could win that contest, that fifteen dollars would put him back on the safe side of fate.

He had just about used his last excuse with Aunt Rachel about that back board money, and he'd have to pay up or get his knitting and pull stakes. The disgrace of being a board-beater, bad as it was, could be borne up under until the stigma could be lived down, or the debt paid. It was not that which troubled him. It was that Minnie Peobles was Aunt Rachel's niece, and Aunt Rachel had a lot of influence with Minnie, and if the old woman were disposed to exercise her influence, it would knock the blocks out of Sud's love nest. And the devil only knows the weeks and months of courting and begging and cajoling required to convert the girl to his way of thinking. When at last she had said yes, Sud was at the very edge of a nervous breakdown.

At all cost, then, he must keep on Aunt Rachel's good side. To do that, he would have to get that money together somehow and pay her the back board. On the other hand, he dared not turn over the fifteen dollars he already possessed, for he simply was compelled to have the money the coming Saturday night, when Dave Watson returned from Connersville, to make that cedar timber deal. If he could swing that trade, cut off that cedar and sell it to the pencil factory, he could swing a neat profit. All he would then have to do would be garner in the cash and marry Minnie.

Full many a man had staked his whole career on a single throw of the dice, and won—or lost. Sud was determined to do this on this fight between his game rooster and Uncle Jesse's old gander. He didn't know what would happen to Uncle Jesse if Aunt Rachel found the old man had gambled away that tobacco money. He didn't care. That was Leverage's risk, not his own. He had enough to worry him, as it was, without shouldering part of Uncle Jesse's troubles.

"Thar's jist one thing I kin safely do," Sud mused, after leaving the store and starting down the road. "That's to go over the ridge to Sile Beeson's whur my rooster air, fotch the bird back with me, and fit him ag'in that thar gander unbeknownest to Uncle Jesse, and so be shore that he kin lick the gander. If he kin, then mebby I kin manage to borrow three more dollars, and git Uncle Jesse to bet all that eighteen dollars he has left of his terbacker check. If my rooster looks like he'll git licked, then I kin manage to back out, and save whut I got."

Here, then, was the solution for the troublesome question of chance involved. His step quickened now, and presently he left the road where the path turned to the left at the blacksmith shop, and he struck off through the woods to Sile Beeson's, where he kept his fighting birds.

"I come to git Ab'um Lincoln, Sile," he announced, two hours later, when he reached his friend's cabin far up Hongry Ridge.

"Whose chicking air you going to take on?"

"T'ain't no chicking a-tall—hit's ole Jesse Leverage's gander!"

For a long moment Beeson examined him, as a warden examines a new nut confined to his custody. Then the ridgeite suddenly let out a roaring horse-laugh.

"Wal, whut the tarnation air you laughing at?" demanded Sud, injured by the levity.

"That thar gander will eat Ab'um Lincoln up, guts, feathers, crow, and all!"

"That's all you know about hit! Anyways, I hain't going to lose no money on the fight. I stand to win, but I shore hain't going to lose!"

"How's that?" Besson demanded.

"I hain't doin' no talking now, Sile!" he denied. "I'll tell you later, but not now. And if anybody comes pestering around trying to find out anything, don't you tell 'em I come and got Ab'um Lincoln."

"I won't, Sud," promised Beeson.

And Sudbury took up his rooster and went back down the mountain.

IN THE meanwhile Uncle Jesse fiddled around the store, more or less bothered in his mind about Aunt Rachel's persistence in running down the last cent of that tobacco money. For years now she had been custodian of the family purse, and the fact that years before the mortgage on the place had been paid off, the stock in the little store gradually augmented, and the family prosperity generally increased, was a monument to her sagacity and good management. So, during those years, as a woman will, she had come to think she owned the place, and the old man himself was merely a hireling.

For so long a period had this impression prevailed that Uncle Jesse found he was unable to correct it. That eighteen dollars he had saved out in hope of being able to pay Sid Harkreader for that whisky bought at intervals for the past two years. Sid had been mighty nice about waiting for his money, for Uncle Jesse had helped him in that cow case, keeping him out of jail for shooting Bill Means' brindle heifer, and Sid was grateful. Nevertheless it was not fair to keep Sid waiting forever for his money. The boy could have sold the same four quarts of prime, double-distilled corn juice at Cornersville for eight or ten dollars a quart. After letting Uncle Jesse have it for four dollars, it was scarcely fair to keep the boy waiting beyond a year for his pay.

Not that Uncle Jesse was either a drinker or slow pay. He simply permitted himself a morning nip—just one. That was all. Never more than a bare thimbleful. Nor did he wink at the law. On the other hand, he was a firm believer in law enforcement, and he had always stood firmly for justice and social order. But after all, didn't the human body manufacture a certain amount of alcohol? Any doctor could tell you that the body was a walking moonshine still. For himself, his own body didn't manufacture quite enough alcohol to meet his needs, he often fancied. Hence he had to purchase his on the outside. And Sid Harkreader made a dependable article that wouldn't stop a man's clock if he should happen to drink a drop too much.

But to get back to the money problem. Should Aunt Rachel take it into her head to camp on the trail of that missing eighteen dollars, she would come within ninety cents of getting it. Then Uncle Jesse would have the embarrassing task of stalling Sid off for a still longer time, and perhaps ruin his credit into the bargain. And the last quart of the prime stuff was gradually moving toward the bottom.

His best bet was to win that fifteen dollars from Sudbury. It was all the money

Sud had. Uncle Jesse very well knew this. Too, he was aware that Sud and Minnie Peobles were fixing to jump the broom handle, and the loss of this fund likely would postpone the wedding till Sud could get hold of some more money elsewhere. But Sud was young, and, although jobs on the mountain were few and far between, youth will find a way. Whereas, old age isn't so elastic.

Trade was slack, so Uncle Jesse closed the front door of the store and passed across the road to the barn lot. Opening the crib door, he scratched out two or three nubbins, and commenced to call the birds with a queer little hissing cluck between his teeth. Several ducks departed the hole over the corner of the lot, and a row of geese stalked with rapid dignity up the green pasture hillside and scrambled through a hole in the fence.

In the lead was a grizzled old gander, Ulysses S. Grant. A sufficiently evil looking warrior he was, too. The bird hissed angrily at the rest of the fowls, and received all the room he desired, as well as the lion's share of the corn Uncle Jesse shelled. There was no question of Ulysses S. Grant's status among the farm fowls. He was the king pin, that was all.

A mule came meandering along, sniffing at the cob in Uncle Jesse's hand. The brute intruded upon Ulysses S. Grant's feeding ground, and the gander grabbed the tender hide around the mule's fetlock, gave it a vicious twist, as of a pair of pliers twisting a cotter pin into shape, and with a snort of baffled pain the mule shied away. Ulysses S. Grant not only lorded it over the birds of the air, but he bluffed the beasts of the field as well.

"Hit shorely don't look like no rooster, unless he war as big as a cow, could do anything with that gander!" mused the magistrate. "Yet, they say them fighting cocks of Sudbury's air the turriblest things that ever come down the road. They say that Abraham Lincoln rooster have whupped ever'thing from a steam engine down to a hornet's nest." He stood for a long time regarding the gander in the light of the game-cock's reputation.

At that moment another gander, younger than Ulysses S. Grant although so closely resembling this venerable bird that only Uncle Jesse could distinguish them apart, undertook to steal a grain of corn. General Grant promptly applied his pliers to the thief's neck and extracted a baffled squawk of fear.

"They jist hain't nothin' else to hit," concluded Leverage, heartened by the episode, "but that Grant will win this battle. Yit," he reflected, "I got to be shore. I can't afford to lose that money. Hit would ruin me forever, If I just had some ways of testing the thing out beforehand—"

His mind commenced to mull over an inspiration that had popped into his brain. Sud kept his birds seven miles up Hongry Ridge, at Sile Beeson's. Why not take General Grant up there one night, sneak into Sid's chicken house, get Abraham Lincoln out, and give the birds a chance to strut their stuff? If General Grant continued on his victorious march to the sea—or was it General Lee that marched to the sea? Uncle Jesse's history was mixed a little, of late years. Anyway, if Grant lived up to his reputation, he would get the bluff in on the chicken, and when the fight came off at the blacksmith shop the following Saturday night, all Uncle Jesse would have to do would be to collect in the stakes.

Shelling a goodly pile of corn at his feet, Uncle Jesse waited till Ulysses S. Grant approached to gobble down the grain, then he grabbed the shrieking gander by a leg, and incarcerated the general in one of the stalls in the barn that was constructed tight enough to hold him.

So Uncle Jesse awaited the fall of night.

SUD decided, as he came down the mountain, that the best thing he could do was to fight shy of Uncle Jesse's house until after he had made his test. He would have a better chance, he felt, if the magistrate did not see him. So, sneaking up to the barn lot from the rear, he locked Abraham Lincoln up in the corncrib. It was just after sundown, and Uncle Jesse had already done up the feeding and gone to the house. Sud saw that the coast was clear, and all he would have to do would be to kill the time until about nine or ten o'clock, after which he could lay hold of the gander—the geese roosted under the crib floor—and settle the problem.

Just at dusk Sud saw the old man leave the house. He carried a sack of something over his shoulder. Where the devil was the old rounder going? Lodge night—that was it. Uncle Jesse was going to the lodge. Likely he was carrying something up to the store on the same trip. Nothing could have suited Sudbury better than this prospect of having the coast entirely clear. There was almost certain to be telltale sounds issuing from the barn, where the test fight would have to take place, and with the old man gone, no afterclaps could possibly clap.

Earlier than he had planned, then, Sud got a lantern out of the smoke-house, crossed over to the barn, lighted it back of the building, and placed the lantern in one of the stalls. Next he secured Abraham Lincoln from the crib, depositing the bird in the stall where Uncle Jesse lately had jailed General Grant. This done, Sud directed his attention to securing possession of the gander. He knew General Grant by sight, and so, after he had got down on his stomach under the crib floor, and swished about among the geese, he was satisfied when at last he got hold of a gander's leg.

Ganders were out of his line. Certain venerable marks that characterized the real fighting hero Sud overlooked. The bird he finally soothed into quiet, while being as heavy as the very dickens, appeared relatively docile. For a scrapper that had consumed all of the iron nails in an ancient pioneer dwelling General Grant certainly had an amiable disposition.

A moment later Sud dropped the gander into the stall. He had but an instant to wait for results. Abraham Lincoln ruffled his feathers, peered out of beady eyes at the intruder; his neck feathers began to fan out, and the cock cleared the decks for action. Making a single feint to try out the enemy's position, Abraham Lincoln flew into the startled gander, and knocked the long-necked bird out with a backhand lick. Had Sud not been right there to save the gander's life, there would have been no fight the coming Saturday night.

Satisfied with what he had seen, Sud took the gander back to the roost under the crib, then cast about for a safe place to keep Abraham Lincoln until Saturday. This was Thursday. The cock would have to be lodged two days and two nights. About the best place, and perhaps the only place, was the harness room. The compartment was sufficiently tight to hold Abraham Lincoln, and Uncle Jesse would not be apt to go there. Crops were laid by; anyway, the mule harness usually were thrown down in the crib, instead of being laid away in the less accessible harness quarters. With a sense of having done a good job with creditable handicraft, he put the chicken in the harness room and locked the door. Then he went to the house and crawled into bed.

WHILE Sudbury was thus engaged Uncle Jesse toiled the seven miles to Beeson's. He was getting old, was Uncle Jesse, and a gander almost as old as himself was far from being a light burden. But at last Uncle Jesse reached the cabin of the ridgeite. By the thin glow of a sickle of moon, he picked his way to the chicken house, after making sure that Beeson was in bed and asleep, and without trouble he located what seemed to be the famous Abraham Lincoln, roosting in a low cedar at the side of the building.

It would be like that intrepid bird, thought Uncle Jesse with a qualm of misgiving, to scorn shelter and take to the great open spaces. Nevertheless this dirty job had to be disposed of and the question settled. He knew how to handle chickens, so without much trouble he worked up until he could get his hands on President Lincoln's leg. Craftily, painstakingly, he lifted the cock out of the brushy foliage.

"That war slick!" the highland magistrate congratulated himself on his skill. "Didn't even make a cackle!"

He placed the dazed chicken on the ground, then untied the sack containing General Grant. The gander, after being carried seven miles up Hongry Ridge, and having his habitual sleep destroyed in this heedless fashion, was ready for battle. This meek looking rooster staggering about in the gloom was just what he wanted to wreak his vengeance upon. The next moment he had applied his pliers to the rooster's neck, and all but finished off the chicken the first onslaught.

"Hyar, hyar!" protested Uncle Jesse peevishly. "Don't you go killing of Ab'um Lincoln in no sich a way as this! Wait till Sattiday night!"

Grabbing the gander hastily, before Beeson might be wakened by the commotion out under the cedars, Uncle Jesse crammed the infuriated bird back into the sack, slung the warrior over his shoulder, and beat a retreat before he should get shot.

As he staggered back down the mountain, he could not but count the night well spent, hard a job as it had been. For he had found out that President Lincoln, with all due respect to the grandeur of that great one whose name the chicken bore, could not hold a candle to General Grant. Already he could feel the money itching in his hand. If he could contrive for Sud to get hold of three dollars more, he would bet every last cent of the eighteen dollars he had saved from the tobacco money.

Reaching home in the dead hours of night, he replaced Ulysses S. Grant in the stall, then Uncle Jesse went to bed.

THE event at the blacksmith shop was of such moment that a little while after dark an audience numbering all of fifty clustered around the little blackened building. Sud had been running around most of the last two days raising the three dollars to make the extra bet, so he had had scant time for anything more than merely watering and feeding Abraham Lincoln. Uncle Jesse, realizing that the best way of diverting Aunt Rachel's attention from himself was by keeping out of view as much as possible, had placed plenty of water and corn in General Grant's stall and visited around among the neighbors till after the fight should be over and the money his to square his financial matters.

"Thar they both come!" shouted some one, as Uncle Jesse hove into view with Ulysses S. Grant fighting mad in a sack across the shoulder. He looked about to see Sud coming from another direction with President Lincoln tucked under his arm.

"Wal," finally asked Sud, looking around the gathering. "I reckon we mout as well have this job done with. Who'll hold the stakes?"

"Who you say?" inquired Uncle Jesse. He tried to conceal his elation at the certainty of the outcome.

Both men looked about the circle of faces, and each of the spectators looked at the others. Finally Lud Peobles, Minnie's brother, proffered his services.

"If hit's agreeable to all hands, I'll hold the jack," he said.

"Suits me," agreed Uncle Jesse.

"Me, too."

"Wal," suggested Wilkes, "let's go in, then, and git the scrap started. I got the shop all cleared out, and a big store box fixed up fur the birds to do thar do in."

With jocular elbowing the men pushed inside when Wilkes unlocked the door. The blacksmith suspended a grimy lantern by a piece of baling wire over the arena, and the contestants supported their gladiators on the edge of the box while Lud Peobles took the money, counted it carefully, and reiterated the terms of the contest.

"All right," he gave the signal, "drap in yur birds!"

He withdrew into the shadows, while Uncle Jesse dropped General Grant into the box, and Sud carefully deposited President Lincoln in the straw. The hush that attended this rite could not have been more complete if the two noted men who gave names to the birds had been down there in person and were about to cut each others' throats. There was a general movement, entirely reflex, that coursed the group as the gander and rooster struck the straw and stood blinking in the light of the lantern.

But there was no hurrah. The hush deepened. Not even the sound of suspended breaths broke the silence. As the two birds continued to peer at each other, but with no move to fly at each others' throats, something taut in the spectators broke.

"Whut the hell—"

"Well, dad blame my hide!"

"Fit, dad-blast your lousy skins!"

But neither General Grant nor President Lincoln showed the least intention of fight. Each backed as far into his corner as he could, standing there in docile wonder.

Suddenly Sud grasped his rooster and heaved the cowardly bird on to the gander. President Lincoln squawked and fluttered about, retreating round and round the box, once or twice actually trying to fly out. Then Uncle Jesse, perversely grabbing that omniverous gander of his by the tail, undertook to inject some fight into the four-flusher with the same method. But General Grant tore the night with a terrible and haggled protest and beat the side of the box with his pinions in a desperate effort to disengage himself from the scrap.

The show promised to be worth the money, for when the contestants saw that their birds would not fight, they bristled up to each other. Uncle Jesse wagged his finger under Sud's nose.

"You stole my General Grant off and put in that cowardly gander, that's what you done!" he accused.

"You're a durned liar!" came back Sud. "You got skiert my Abe Lincoln would beat yur ole gander up, and you got one of them young, no-count roosters of mine and put him thar in the harness room in place of Ab'um Lincoln!"

Each suddenly directed his attention to his bird. Whatever the cause, the accusations were true. The gander was not General Grant, and the other, the rooster, was not Abraham Lincoln, but a sappy cockrel that had never had a fight.

"Gimme back my stake!" both shouted in a single voice.

"I done lost hit!" moaned Lub Peobles. "I rolled that money up in a wad—you men seed me—then I backed off yer sorter by the door, and drat my hide if somebody hain't picked my pockits!"

"Picked your pockits!" echoed Uncle Jesse, dazed.

Lud turned all his pockets inside out, mutely displaying a terrifying emptiness.

A wild search was immediately instituted. Nobody looked at any one else now, for such a look might imply something that nobody at this juncture cared to imply. But at the end of a fast quarter of an hour of search no stake was forthcoming. Apparently the thirty-six dollars had been swallowed up by some mysterious hole in the earth, and was gone forever from human sight.

Baffled, ready for war at a moment's notice, Uncle Jesse and Sud took up their impotent birds and started off, while the audience, with a farewell of rich horse-laugh, directed their steps in their respective directions.

THE next morning at the breakfast table host and guest kept their eyes on their plates. War clouds still hung heavy over them. Even the cheery step of Aunt Rachel, who apparently had forgotten all about the missing tobacco fund, and Minnie Peobles, whose strong young sunshiny face ought to have scattered the gloom on her lover's visage, did little to mitigate the glowering silence.

Uncle Jesse mumbled grace. His voice had scarcely quivered to a close than a flivver horn honked at the gate.

"That's Bill Doyle," said Aunt Rachel. "Minnie, you go tell him to leave that thing in the hall."

"Whut thing?" demanded Uncle Jesse. "Whut's Bill Doyle fotching yer?"

"Hit's an iron bed," replied Aunt Rachel placidly.

"An iron bed!" echoed Uncle Jesse.

"I said an iron bed, and I meant an iron bed! What's that piece of paper doing of under yur plate, Sud?"

Sudbury wonderingly turned his plate over. There lay a sheet of white tablet paper. He examined it with the semi-literate man's hesitant manner.

"Hit's a receipt, Aunt Rachel," he finally answered. "Hit's say, 'In full payment of six weeks of board.' Somebody's paid my board. Unless—you didn't gimme my board, did you Aunt Rachel?"

Uncle Jesse had taken the paper and was eying it critically. Comprehension lighted his face.

"That's the pickpocket!" he shouted, pointing his finger at Aunt Rachel. "You and Minnie made hit up to sneak out thar and bust that cock-fight up, then you seed yur chanct and picked Lud's pockits! That's yur dirty work! Sud!" he turned fiercely on the youth, "I told you when you started to talking in the store the other morning to keep yur fool palaver shut, or these wimmin would eavesdrop us! That's jist whut they done, too, by grabs—"

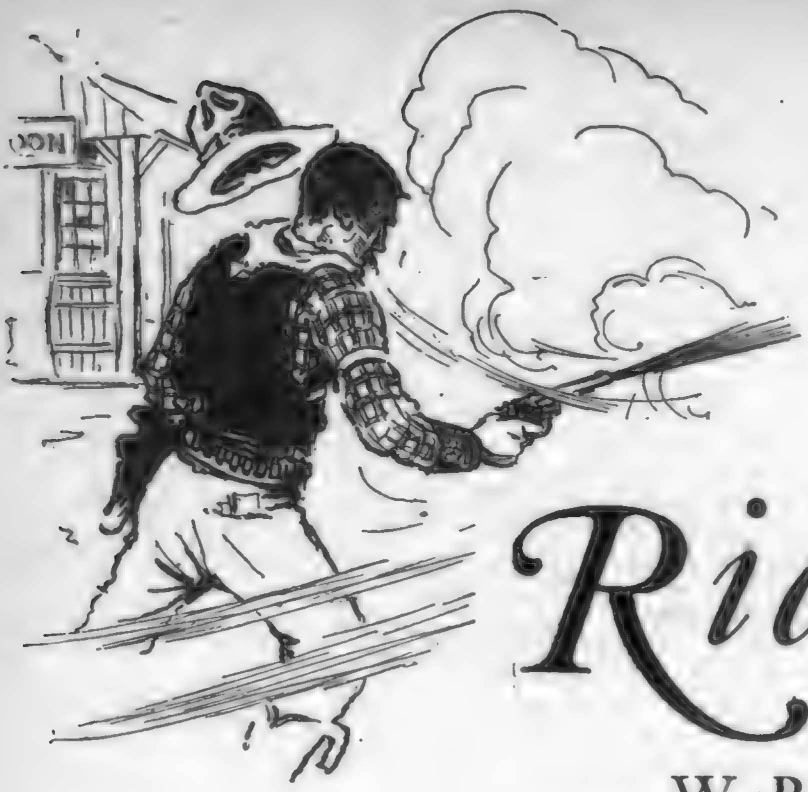
"And I bet them war the ones that changed that gander and rooster——"

Both jumped up from the table.

"Quick, Sud!" panted Uncle Jesse. "Apt as not they left them birds get together thar in the barn, and my gander's done eat yur trashy rooster down to the very bones by this time!"

"You mean Ab'um Lincoln's done carved yur lousy old gander to shreds!"

They ran together, passing out of the yard gate, across the road, and into the lot, like two heroes charging a German line. In one of the stalls they found the two belligerent birds, where Aunt Rachel and Minnie, in their effort to queer this fight, had inadvertently placed them. Cold and stiff in one corner thay lay. General Grant had Abraham Lincoln fastened in a vise-like grip of his terrible pliers, while President Lincoln had stuck his steel-like gaffs into General Grant's very heart. Both had died as befitted their illustrious namesakes.



Ridin'

by

W. B. Corcoran

Here's a Western that will keep

AS THE rider walked his horse along the street of the little cow town he stared morosely at a setting which was only too drearily familiar. He felt that he had been in Okalona many times before; its plank sidewalks, the hitching rails, the sun-bleached board houses, the signs before each store and saloon, all were those of the town of his birth and dozens of others of unexciting memory from far-off Idaho to this wild corner of Arizona.

Nampa Jack Delaney was sour on life. After working for two years in southern Montana he had saddled his horse and ridden off out of sheer boredom. In his soul, unknown to him, was working that ferment which had sent young men across the world from the beginning of time. It was the dominant theme in the legends of the Golden Fleece, of the Holy Grail. It had peopled the West. It had sent Delaney's grandfather from the corn-fields of Ohio to the short-grass country of Kansas, and his father on from there into the vast empire of the Northwest. It had called Nampa Jack, and being twenty-four, alone in the world, and able to take care of himself, Nampa Jack had obeyed.

Another rider appeared on the deserted street just then, and Nampa Jack felt a flicker of interest stir in him as the man dismounted at the dingy little hotel. By the dust on his clothes and the weariness of his mount the newcomer had traveled far, but beyond these outward signs an air of reserve, of observant watchfulness, placed the man apart from the commonplace setting of Okalona.

He was a man of doubtful age, of medium stature and a lean hardness of figure that denoted a life of action. His face was tanned and calm, and in the corners of his mouth was a touch of humor that relieved the severity of his thin lips. He wore a dark suit and riding-boots and a soft Stetson. After glancing along the street with a sort of disinterested curiosity he left his horse hitched to the rail and carried his saddle roll inside the hotel.

Nampa Jack dismissed the incident from his mind as he drew up before a large saloon which seemed to mark the exact center of the town. Throwing the reins over the rail, he entered the place. The saloon, like the

A Novelette

THROUGH

You Jumping from Page to Page

town, was familiar in every appointment, and he gave the few customers lounging against the bar only a cursory glance.

For a few moments Nampa Jack stared moodily into his glass. What to do next was a problem that became increasingly baffling. He could afford to do without a job for a while; his father had left a tiny legacy which Jack had never touched until now. Besides, he had thrown up a better job than he would likely find in this country. Nampa Jack needed very badly a grail or a fleece of his own. Something to desire, to fight for. Something to fight for! At the moment, he reflected sourly, he felt as much like fighting for anything as a jack-rabbit streaking over a hundred miles of prairie.

Unconsciously Nampa Jack looked up from his abstraction. His eyes met the stare of a man who apparently had been studying him for some minutes. He stood at the end of the bar, leaning over the mahogany, a large angular figure of a man with flat, expressionless eyes and a wide slit of a mouth.

Delaney felt a dim glow of irritation as the man's scrutiny continued. He stared fixedly in return and called down the bar, "Think you'll know me next time?" The other patrons instantly looked up in surprise.

The man did not reply immediately. And when he spoke it was in a voice that matched the expressionless quality of his eyes. "Figger you're worth knowin'?" he asked.

"You seem to have answered that for yourself," returned the cowboy. Dryly he added, "But my list of acquaintances is full up."

"You're real exclusive, ain't you!" remarked the big man with dry rancor. He left his post at the end of the bar and approached. "You ridin' through?"

Nampa Jack felt a thrill of interest replace the apathy that was on him. This fellow was looking for trouble. "Whose business is that?" he countered.

The man drew aside a corner of his vest for answer, revealing a sheriff's star pinned to the suspender strap. "I'm Saul Peters, sheriff of this county," he announced. "You ridin' through?"

There was insinuation in the sheriff's

voice that such might possibly be the wisest course. Nampa Jack considered. This put a different aspect on the situation. He knew that his appearance, trail worn, hardened, and including a low hung holster on his right thigh, might conceivably arouse the interest of a cautious peace officer. But the sheriff, and the other men in the saloon, looked hard enough themselves. It was palpably more than simple official zeal.

"I ain't decided," returned Jack insolently. "Come around later when I've made up my mind."

Saul Peters allowed a faintly menacing grin to cross his face. "All right," he said. "But take off that gun."

Nampa Jack glanced about the room. "How come?" he asked. The others all wore the gun belts which were a conventional article of apparel in that day and country.

"Nobody allowed to carry guns inside this town. Them—" he nodded to the half-dozen interested listeners — "them's all deputies of mine."

"Oh," said the cowboy, "I see." But what he saw was the grin of amusement that flickered over each face at the sheriff's statement. "Well, I'll think that over too." He moved away from the bar and his glowing eyes held a message of danger. There was more than a grain of stubbornness in Nampa Jack Delaney.

Peters opened his mouth, but the cowboy spoke first. "Now, I just said I'd think it over, sheriff," he repeated warningly. "I might be passing through at that." His right hand was hooked in his belt, his feet were planted squarely apart. His attitude left no room for doubt. "Have I got your official permission?"

The sheriff's nostrils quivered for an instant while he held in check the anger that gripped him. He did not seem to be a man moved by fear, but he could sense in the cowboy a readiness to accept challenge that would give any man thought.

"How about it, sheriff?" Delaney asked softly.

The man kept his anger under control by obvious effort. Some stronger motive ruled him. Abruptly the flat expressionless mask fell over his face once more. "If you're ridin'—git," he said. "If you're stayin' over you leave that gun with your stuff at the livery-stable. I'll be seeing you later, fella."

He stared for a moment out of opaque black eyes, and then turned about and walked to where his half-emptied glass stood on the bar.

Nampa Jack watched him go, smiling wryly. There was a colored gentleman in this wood-pile sure, but the exact shade of his complexion was a complete mystery to the cowboy. He too moved to the bar, threw down a coin, and strolled casually out of the saloon.

NAMPA JACK surveyed the little town with a totally different eye as he mounted his horse. It was no more beautiful now, but it was a place with individuality, even if that quality held only danger for him. He had something to scrap about, at least, should he feel in need of exercise. Walking his horse down the street he observed with considerable interest many details of Okalona which had hitherto escaped his eye; the several heavy-walled adobe buildings typical of the country; the solitary rider loping in from the desert with a bundle on the saddle behind him, swarthy faced, wearing high-crowned sombrero and embroidered bolero, equally typical of a country little more than a good day's journey from the border. The town suddenly acquired possibilities of interest all its own.

He turned into the livery-yard and eyed the individual who, back to the wall, snored quietly in the shade of the stable. After a moment's study of the hostler, a fair-haired youngster about sixteen, Nampa Jack grinned and unfastened his rope, shaking out a tiny loop. This he flung gently toward the sleeping figure. The loop settled over one outstretched foot and was drawn tight. The cowboy touched the reins.

There was a tremendous yell at the end of the rope and a scrambling that obscured itself in the dust it raised. "Hey!" came the violent protest. "What the hell! By cripes, I'll kill the guy—!" The hostler sat up when Jack halted, and out in the bright sunlight several feet from his original site, it took him a moment to recover from his surprise. "What the hell you tryin' to do?" he demanded heatedly.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Jack apologized.

"What?" The youngster screwed up his face in puzzlement.

"Somebody'd sure step on you, where you

lay," explained the cowboy earnestly. "I just aimed to move you easy like over beside the corral."

The hostler removed the rope from his ankle. "Say," he demanded with dignity, "you tryin' to cod me?"

Nampa Jack pushed back his Stetson and scratched one ear while he considered. At length he shook his head. "No," he denied, "that couldn't be done." He swung down from the saddle and handed the reins to the boy, who watched him in uncertainty and suspicion. "Feed him good," said the cowboy, "and watch him careful, he bites."

Then Delaney frowned as there came to him a subject for serious thought. His gun—should he wear it or not? Very little reflection convinced him of the wisdom of leaving it behind until he might know better what he might gain by its use. The sheriff could not molest him while he was unarmed. And if he went armed—well, the fellow *was* a sheriff after all, and Nampa Jack had a healthy respect for law officers within the bounds of their duty.

He handed the hostler the gun belt. "Here, keep this with the saddle, son," he directed.

OKALONA CITY boasted one restaurant. This was evident after a brief examination of the signs in view along the street. Nampa Jack bent his steps toward that which bore the terse and sufficient legend, "EATS." "I'll stake my saddle it's run by a Chink," he observed wryly to himself as he entered.

It was with deep and not successfully concealed amazement, therefore, that he beheld the young woman in black sateen who came through the door from the kitchen. She was a slender, pretty, young woman, and she smiled a grave and welcoming smile at her second customer. The other, eating quietly at a corner table, was the stranger who arrived that afternoon. He had nodded in friendly fashion on Jack's entrance.

"What'll it be, cowboy?" the girl asked. She added, too, "You look hungry. Been riding long?"

Nampa Jack struggled with an unaccustomed problem of concentration. He was not so startled that he could not find words, nor was he the victim of calfish love at first sight. He did not think of love. He wanted very badly to sit back and stare at the wholesome simplicity of the girl without interruption. She had a clear light in her blue eyes, a slenderness in her face that perhaps detracted from sheer beauty but which unaccountably caught at a man's heartstrings. She was no more than twenty-two. Work, since she must be familiar with it in a restaurant, had not yet roughened her soft slenderness. And her hair was golden brown, a subtly thrilling color in any man's eyes.

It was with a certain conscious effort that Nampa Jack spoke. "Yes, I been riding all day, ma'am. And I am hungry; no doubt about it. But I think if you worked up a sizeable mess of steak and fried 'taters I might get my strength back." He smiled. It was a calculated effort—a deliberate attempt to awaken an answering one on the face of his hostess, so that he might feel again that tightening about his heart. It had been a long time—he was afraid to think how long—since a girl like this had smiled on him.

The girl not only smiled; she laughed, softly and with a tiny show of even white teeth. It was a thoroughly satisfactory experiment. Nampa Jack leaned a little more confidentially over the worn but clean tablecloth. "Are you going to cook it for me, ma'am?" he asked.

The girl frowned suspiciously, but there was a light of mischief in her eyes. "I'll have you understand, cowboy," she said, "that my cooking—"

"Oh, Lord, miss," begged Nampa Jack, "I ain't said a word against your cooking!"

"Well—"

"Miss," he began desperately, "my meals has been prepared by stove-up bronc busters and pint-size Chinamen and fat Mexicans for —— knows how long. I'm going to enjoy it twice over if I knows that—well, that a pretty gal like you is cooking for me." He grinned with relief.

The girl reflected doubtfully, chin in hand. "My first chef is taking his day off," she said. "My second is busy opening oysters. My third—" she paused and studied the cowboy. "But I think I'll make an exception and cook that steak myself this time." She brushed up a microscopic crumb from the table and departed. But as the kitchen door closed behind her she smiled over her shoulder in the intimate manner of one who shares a wholly delightful joke.

"Boy, howdy!" exclaimed Nampa Jack

with enthusiasm. He grinned happily at the quiet stranger in the corner, and the man gave him an appreciative soft grin in return. The world was all right by Nampa Jack Delaney at that moment.

After an interval of waiting the girl returned with a great steak, odorous with gravy, and potatoes done to a golden brown. Her face was touched with color from her session over the hot range, and a single lock of light hair strayed down over her forehead in charming disarray. Her eyes gleamed with triumph. "How's that, cowboy?" she demanded.

Nampa Jack was speechless. "Gosh!" he exclaimed. "That's plumb perfect!" But he was not looking at the dishes she set before him, and a further glow of color mounted on her cheeks. She retreated to her kitchen.

Delaney addressed himself earnestly to the tender steak. It was cooked, he vowed immediately, as no steak had been cooked since—since those a long-gone mother had prepared for him. It was a perfect meal.

IT WAS, that is, until the street door was darkened by the large form of Saul Peters. The sheriff glanced narrowly at the cowboy with suspicious surprise. He seemed on the verge of speech, but changing his mind he toed aside a chair and sat down. He pushed his hat back on his head and moved the holstered gun to a position of comfort. The quiet stranger received his scrutiny in turn.

"That fella," thought Delaney to himself, "has something on his mind. He's just too damn suspicious, and it might be interesting to know what for."

Then the girl pushed through the kitchen door. The sight of her new guest had an immediate effect that Delaney did not miss. Her face grew cold, and in its immobility there was a hint of fear. Peters stared fishily at her for an instant, as though to probe some secret from her, and then gave a stale sort of smirk.

"Evenin', Jane," he said.

The girl approached his table and offered no greeting in return. "What would you like to have, sheriff," she inquired calmly.

The rebuff, if he noticed it, only amused Peters. He grinned more broadly, as though he could afford to be amused. "Anything you got'd be fine eatin', Jane. You ought to know what'd please a man."

"We have—"

"You do the choosin', girl, and I'll eat it." The sheriff waved his hand as if to brush aside her assumption of a business air between them. Jane stared at him with a dim anger in her eyes—the more potent because it seemed helpless. She turned and strode through the kitchen door without speaking. Peters chuckled.

Nampa Jack leaned back in his chair and glanced at the man in the corner of the room. The stranger had finished his meal, and he now sat smoking a cigar in quiet contemplation of the scene.

"Some fellas," Jack observed aloud, "is so plumb like hogs that if they didn't wear pants you'd never know the difference." The room was electric with tension instantly. The stranger continued to puff on his cigar, but his eyes glowed faintly as they traveled from Delaney to the sheriff and back again.

"I once worked on a ranch," continued Delaney, addressing the stranger, "that kept a lot of hogs. They was profitable, I guess, but plumb degeneratin' on the folks as tended them. I had to quit there in time, even though I had nothing to do with the critters. I couldn't stand them hands. You know—" he glanced casually toward Peters, who glared at him through narrowed eyes—"they always came to table with their hats on. Hogs don't wear hats, which is one point in their favor. But that wasn't all—when they ate they never even took their guns off!"

"That so?" observed the stranger.

There was a sudden scraping of a chair. The sheriff rose to his feet but Delaney paid no attention. "Fact is," he went on, "in spite of their drawbacks, hogs really is lots more decent than lots of fellas I've met."

"Lissen, you!" Saul Peters was beside him. "You got a line of talk that listens like poison to me!"

"What—?" exclaimed the cowboy in mock surprise. "Why—what's biting you? Seems I was talkin' to a friend of mine here about a personal matter. It can't concern you, can it?"

The sheriff glared, at a loss for a retort. He realized instantly that Delaney had lured him into an untenable position, and his slower though quite tenacious brain did not welcome an engagement of wits. The calm, puzzled demeanor of the cowboy infuriated him. He abruptly turned and walked back to his chair. There he sat defiantly staring at the two opposite him. Only his eyes burned with smoldering and baffled fury.

WHEN the girl returned with food for the sheriff her face was calm. Nampa Jack watched her eyes, and as their glances met for an instant he thought he caught a gleam of suppressed mirth. There was also something he thought might be gratitude. The sheriff had nothing further to say, and he tackled his food in deliberate silence.

Both Nampa Jack and the stranger sat at ease in their chairs, smoking, and in Delaney's case, watching the officer's gastronomic efforts with an aimless but quite discomforting interest. The weighty silence in the room grew heavier as time went by, and its burden became oppressive to Saul Peters.

The girl, however, seemed to feel the tension in the little restaurant more than any of the men. She busied herself about the room, she carried off the dishes of the two who were finished, she moved with an air of industry that precluded conversation but which gave Delaney food for serious thought. There was a nigger in the woodpile here too, and no foolin'. The sheriff had already made himself obnoxious to more than a mere cowboy. The girl was afraid of Saul Peters, and Nampa Jack would have given much to know why.

"Listen, miss," he said once, as she cleaned off an adjoining table. He spoke softly, so that his voice might not carry across the room. The girl stopped and looked with a queer expression; her head made an imperceptible movement of appeal. "Miss," he said abruptly, "does that fella give you as much of a pain as he gives me?"

"Don't!" she whispered. Half fearfully she glanced at the sheriff to see if he had heard. Hurriedly she continued, "Don't say anything, please. That's the sheriff. You've gone much too far already."

He caught her hand lightly on the table beside him. "You sit down here a minute, ma'am," he ordered, "and tell me what's wrong. I made up my mind before I came in here that I'd never get along with that fella, and I'd be plumb grateful for a fair reason to punch his nose."

The hand was withdrawn. Before Jane could speak the sheriff called from his table. "Jane! This here coffee's cold. You know I don't like cold coffee," he added ominously.

Delaney swore under his breath as the girl hurried over to take the offending cup from Peters' hand.

Coffee that steamed as it was brought to him seemed to satisfy the sheriff and he drank it noisily. Jane retreated to the kitchen, refusing to meet the appeal in Delaney's eyes.

She was still hidden inside when Saul Peters rose from the table with a scraping of his chair. He took a toothpick from the counter and stood manipulating the wooden sliver for a moment. Then he strolled across the room to the cowboy.

"I expect you to be ridin'," he announced. "Don't be around after six o'clock. I'll be lookin' for you."

With that he turned and left the restaurant.

CHAPTER II

FOR a long time Delaney sat motionless in his chair. He was left alone; the stranger had departed soon after the sheriff, merely nodding as he went out; and Nampa Jack reflected somberly with his eyes on the kitchen door. Funny, he thought, that he should meet up with so ugly a man and so pretty a girl on the same afternoon. And to get orders to shove along on top of that! Saul Peters had the right to give such orders—the right of six-guns—but Nampa Jack could invoke that power himself if need be.

Was it worth it? Delaney had more good sense than to get shot up for no good reason. He was not afraid, but he was wise in the ways of his world. Okalona held no attraction for him worth fighting over, unless—but that was the catch in it. Well, he would see.

The door had remained perversely closed all this while. Delaney rose and knocked on the panels, reflecting wryly that his own life, and the lives of God knows how many others, hung in the balance before the answer on the other side. Jane appeared in response, but she did no more than halt in the half-opened entrance with a question in her calm eyes.

"Ma'am," said Jack, "before I go I wants very badly to talk to you. Won't you come out a minute? I won't keep you."

The girl frowned in disapproval, but he held the door open insistently. With a shrug of her slender shoulders she entered the room. Jack pulled up a chair for her and drew another opposite for himself. "Now listen," he began. "I know I'm hell and all for interfering, but there's something wrong between you and that sheriff that maybe I could take a hand in. Maybe I can't too. But I want to know."

"Sheriff Peters is nothing at all to me," Jane stated calmly. "So far as I know he is a conscientious officer. I don't think you were at all wise to antagonize him."

"Those remarks don't jibe," pointed out Delaney. "I got no reason to be afraid of officers of any kind. But hombres with the mean disposition of that one might come to be good and scared of me—which ain't boasting either."

The girl studied him a moment with grave eyes. Then her gaze went out the door and over the plains to the far-off mountain range that lay blue in the distance.

"If I get in wrong with you, ma'am," continued the cowboy softly, "it can't matter much anyway. I'm only a drifting cowpuncher and I've tangled myself up before where I didn't mean to—and the world goes on just the same. That's why I'm daring to talk so plumb direct; I just don't count either way. Now there's something wrong, isn't there?"

"Yes, there is," admitted the girl reluctantly. Her hands were pressed together on the table before her and a wistful look came into her eyes. Delaney thought to himself that a word of sympathy seemed to fall strangely on her ears. Whatever the situation was, he surmised, no one in this spineless town had done even that little service for her.

She rose and walked to the door where she stood for a moment in reflection. Then she turned about and faced Delaney. A smile was on her face again, but it left the heart of Nampa Jack chilled. It was reserved, forbidding.

"Thank you, cowboy," she said. "I know you honestly mean that. But it will be better if you—if you keep on drifting and leave this town far behind."

He rose. "Miss—" he began.

"No." She shook her head and moved to the kitchen door. "If you aim to please me you'll do just that." The little nod her head made was cordial but complete dismissal.

Nampa Jack studied her for a moment. Conflicting impulses stirred him deeply. The inflexibility of her will aroused a spark of resentment in him. He turned about and strode to the door. As he went out he looked back once. He halted. "Good-by, ma'am," he said.

"Good-by, cowboy." Her face was calm, inscrutable as the street door banged shut and the tread of Delaney's boots echoed hollowly on the wooden steps.

OUTSIDE the street was empty. It was perhaps fortunate for Sheriff Peters that he had not lingered. Delaney looked about for him and muttered an oath of disappointment under his breath. Nampa Jack was angry, and as he could not take out his anger on the one who had caused it, he would have enjoyed calling the sheriff's bluff. He swung down the street toward the livery-stable in a dark mood of scorn for the entire community of Okalona.

The rebuff was natural enough, considering that he was a total stranger. This he knew, and he admitted that it probably was the girl's business in the first place. He had no call to butt in. He was only making trouble for her. He was, he summed up, a triple distilled damn fool anyway. Wimmen! He'd let 'em alone a long time—which had worked out fine for both sides. He'd do the same now.

He found the hostler busy mending a piece of harness in the stable doorway, and he spied his horse standing contented and full of grain in a stall. The boy regarded him with an air that suggested injured dignity. "You back again?" he observed dubiously.

"Go to hell!" breathed Nampa Jack. His mind was on other things; the gratuitous insult was unconscious and unplanned as he walked into the stable to where his saddle hung on a pin. He was getting out of Okalona, pronto.

It was, therefore, with more surprise than resentment that he felt a hand snatch at his sleeve and halt his progress, turning him about. The youngster placed himself in Nampa Jack's path, and though the boy's cheeks were pale, his eyes flashed with anger.

"What're you tryin' to do, cowboy?" he asked in an uneven voice. "Coddin's all right, but I ain't standin' for no man's meanness. If you meant what you said I'll bust your face for you."

It took a full minute for the cause of the boy's behavior to dawn on Nampa Jack. Then he smiled and his bad temper was all gone. "I'm sorry, kid," he said. "That was pure cussedness on my part and nothing else." He was two inches taller than the boy, and at least thirty pounds heavier; the spunk of the hostler won him completely. "By ——, you should have smashed me!" he added. "You're right and back again, and those words are unanimously withdrawn."

The boy was embarrassed now, but his resentment vanished before the sincerity of the cowboy's apology. He was relieved down deep, though he would not admit it even to himself, that Delaney had withdrawn his offense. "All right," he allowed, "I ain't keepin' any grudge. Only I'm glad you—that you didn't mean it."

"I didn't," Nampa Jack assured him. "But I was feeling kind of annoyed at this town in general, and my picking on you was just accidental. I aimed to trail along in a hurry." He paused. "Say, come to think of it, that's exactly what that doggone sheriff ordered me to do! I forgot that."

"Saul Peters ordered you to trail? Why?'

"Mostly, it seems because he objects to any one talking to that girl in the restaurant."

"Oh!" The monosyllable held a world of doubt. "What was it you said to the girl?"

"Does it make any difference to you, son?"

"Mebby. My name is Dave Cannon. Jane Cannon is my sister."

"O-oh! I see." Nampa Jack gazed at the boy with a new interest. "Then you can tell me what's on this sheriff's mind that he has a call to act so mean."

The boy studied Delaney with care. Plainly he was tempted to confide in this stranger. Despite the riding Nampa Jack had given him, there was something about the cowboy that won the youngster's respect. It was equally apparent that the sheriff's enmity was a commendation with him for Nampa Jack.

"Who are you?" he asked. "You heard my name. You from Phœnix?"

Nampa Jack shook his head. "No. And the name doesn't mean a thing."

"I didn't think so, but I wanted to be sure. Anyway—" he paused and gave the cowboy renewed study—"I guess it's not exactly news to you that Sheriff Peters is the biggest crook in the territory."

Jack's brows rose dubiously. "Tall words, Dave."

The boy smiled dryly. "They ain't half tall enough. You don't know that feller." With sudden heat he declared, "I *do!* Saul Peters thinks I'm a no-account kid, but I'm gonna show him. I got the deadwood on him." He nodded with grim if mysterious assurance.

HOW come, and what happened, and why?" asked Nampa Jack. "Let's have the whole works. I got a personal interest in this."

"Well, ours is a wild sorta country," explained the boy. He sat down in the shade of the barn, where Delaney joined him to roll a cigaret. "The sheriff just about runs things to suit himself. We used to have fellers who owned land or stock as sheriffs, but Saul Peters got a gang behind him a couple of years ago and walked off with the job. There's been hell to pay for it ever since, but nobody around has the nerve to say a word. Rustlin', for instance; Peters has a herd now as big as any in the county. All his, too, but take three guesses where he got the money to buy 'em. That leaves two guesses left over, which you can try on what becomes of odd strays and bunches all over the valley. There's killin's, and hold-ups, and crooked gamblin' and worse. Last month the Southern Pacific was stuck up for forty thousand and a guy killed; the whole gang of bandits heads this way and Sheriff Saul Peters lets 'em scatter all over the whole darn county without catchin' one of them. Oh, I know him. He ain't no sheriff; he's a bandit and a killer himself."

"Right nice fella, ain't he?" Delaney smoked thoughtfully for a moment, some new-born idea turning over in his mind. "Those train robbers now—how do you know they hid out in this country?"

"Ask some of the fellers who were on the posse Peters took out! They'll swear that if he used any judgment he could have caught them. Their tracks were plain as day right to where they split. They were more'n a day old, but anybody could have followed 'em. Instead the sheriff makes the whole posse wild-goose with him over the hills to where he says they're sure to get together again. Hell, when the posse gets back after three days of that they learn that the gang has been reported fifty miles away to the south, travelin' slow and comfortable."

"Well, he might have come a cropper once; anybody could. What's biting me now is the idea that Sheriff Peters maybe jumped me thinking I was a train bandit."

The hostler shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe the moon's made of green cheese," he observed cryptically. "I know more than I'm tellin'—yet."

Nampa Jack smiled. "It doesn't matter much. Go on with your story. How does Jane figure in it?"

"I was gettin' to that. You see, we come from a ranch about thirty miles south of here; born and brought up on it, we was. Ma is dead; pa is out there tryin' to run things with my kid brother. He's fourteen. Well, all our neighbors was losin' cows like they was leakin' out a old bucket. Every one but pa. So plenty got to wonderin' why only he escaped. Peters used to come around to see Jane a lot, but Jane would pretend he came to see pa. So they was said to be thick together. Now, half the county thinks we're safe from rustlers because the thieves is afraid of the sheriff; the other half, suspectin' Peters of everything on the statute books, says pa is in cahoots with the sheriff who uses pa as a blind and splits profits with him. Just try and figger out how popular pa gets to be, with everybody too damn scared to do anything about findin' the real crook!"

"Somebody used his brains somewhere in that."

"Well, Saul Peters got kinda unpopular with Jane pretty soon. She couldn't see him at all. I chased him with a shotgun myself once. He don't like me at all since. And pa himself orders him off finally. For a while we has peace—" The boy paused.

"What happened?" urged the cowboy.

"That double-crossin' son of a coyote!" exclaimed young Dave bitterly. His voice trembled with feeling. "If I didn't have a better idea in my head I'd shoot him. He worked a triple distilled frame on us. He sized up our general reputation among them sheep of neighbors of ours and he lays some evidence of cattle stealin' which a couple of deputies find accidental like. Then he comes and tells pa about it; says he's keepin' off the deputies; breakin' the law for us. Not for us, he admits, not exactly; but for Jane. He asks that Jane should come to town and run the restaurant. Peters owns notes on the restaurant, which was run by a Mexican before that. I learned that Peters chased the Mexican out of town with a gun —that's all the notes he has!"

"Did Jane fall for that?"

"Huh! You shoulda been there. Pa was gonna kick him out, but he begins talkin' about lynchin' parties for a suspected rustler, about the ten years in the penitentiary if he's lucky enough, about buckshot through a window on a dark night. Jane listens about five minutes and packs up pronto. Wouldn't listen to no argument either; just ups and comes. She's been here about three months, and I'm here on my own hook to shoot the guy the first time he goes just too far."

"What's his game with Jane?" inquired Delaney. He rolled and lighted a fresh cigaret and though his voice was calm, his fingers held the paper none too steadily. Nampa Jack was making his acquaintance with the emotion called jealousy in a particularly virulent form.

"Well, he says he wants to marry her."

"Says so, eh?"

The boy glanced oddly at Delaney. "Seein' as he and me is neither of us shot up yet, you can take my word for it that sayin' things is as much as he's done—so far."

Nampa Jack rose to his feet. He tossed the cigaret aside and pulled the Stetson down over his eyes with a jerk. "Kid," he said, "get me my gun belt."

CHAPTER III

AS NAMPA JACK walked up the short length of street that did for Okalona he saw that his presence in town was not going unnoticed. Before the pool parlor a hard-looking man in cowpuncher's garb leaned against the porch rail and eyed him with an unfriendly stare. He was of that silent, pale-eyed type which Delaney had met before in his wanderings, the type that is the born killer. Behind the screen door of the general store two dim forms could be seen against the inner shadow, also watching him. Delaney rolled a cigaret and walked on, giving his belt a hitch so as to bring the holster more handily forward.

That there was trouble in the offing seemed evident by the very air of quiet about the town. Delaney knew the signs; knew how when a one-man town gets suspicious the feeling spreads like a fever. Often he had been glad to escape with whole skin from such places, and his discretion would ordinarily have sent him riding before this. But there was a factor here he had never had to consider before—a girl. He would look up this sheriff, learn what he could from him, and perhaps throw a bluff of some kind if his luck held.

A small adobe building at one end of the street bore the sign, "Sheriff, Delta County," above its door; and now this door suddenly opened and the tall awkward form of Saul Peters emerged. He stared at the cowboy as he pulled the door to, and then strode directly toward him.

"You ridin'?" he demanded.

"I call this walking," corrected Nampa Jack. "Been looking for you."

"You'll be flyin' if you don't get right back and saddle your horse," said the sheriff grimly.

"I never decide things so fast, fella. I told you that before."

"You got five minutes," Peters declared flatly.

Nampa Jack felt the tiny hairs at the back of his neck raise with the anger that crept over him. He was not in the habit of allowing any man to talk to him like that. "You got one minute, Peters," he said softly, "to get the hell outa my way."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed with satisfaction, and he made a swift move for his gun. But quicker than his hand was the fist of the cowboy. Nampa Jack's whole body launched itself forward, and a double short-arm punch rocked the officer's head and then sent him head over heels off the board sidewalk into the dust of the road. The six-gun was knocked out of his grasp as he fell.

Delaney kicked the gun aside. "You understand now that I ain't fooling, sheriff?" he inquired. He stepped over the prostrate officer. "Shall I argue further, or does it penetrate?"

Saul Peters was a big man and he was not without a certain courage. Seeing the gun put away he gathered his startled senses and leaped up at Delaney. The cowboy dodged and let fly with an earnest jab that landed exactly as he intended. Nampa Jack was an eccentric among cowpunchers; he knew how to use his fists.

The battle was not long in ending. The attack of the big man was furious, but by that very reason easy for Delaney to meet. Peters sought to get the cowboy within the grasp of his huge hands, but Nampa Jack dodged and landed blows that rocked the sheriff to his very toes. One clean punch finished the job. Sheriff Peters groped in a daze, tripped and found himself sitting once more in the dust shaking his head stupidly.

Nampa Jack looked about him with a suspicious eye. The street now held what was a crowd for Okalona, and foremost among them was the tough-looking hombre from the pool parlor. He moved to get Delaney between him and the sheriff, but the cowboy placed himself with back against the building before which the battle had raged and his hand fell on the butt of his gun.

"Anybody else got anything to say?" he demanded. No one answered but a couple helped the sheriff to his feet and one shoved the retrieved gun into the officer's holster. The killer moistened his lips and watched the sheriff, but Peters ignored him. He cleared his head quickly enough and shook off his supporters.

"You're gonna pay for that!" he grated.

"The only way you'll be able to collect will be with a shotgun on a dark night," retorted Nampa Jack. "I'm going to give you plenty chance the next few weeks."

The sheriff placed a hand on the gun butt. "Unbuckle that belt," he ordered. The hard-looking man ranged alongside of him and his hand fell to a similar position.

"Am I under arrest?" inquired Delaney.

"Yes."

"What's the charge?"

The sheriff snarled evilly. "Anything you want. Vagrancy up to assault with intent to kill. Resistin' an officer will do." He wiped away the blood that ran over his lips.

Delaney smiled. "Sheriff, I keep this belt. First off, you have exceeded your authority by considerable already. Second, remember that your position gets worse if you try anything more. Think it over."

A flicker of uncertainty passed over the eyes of the officer and he hesitated. Not so the others, and the gunman beside him spoke from the side of his mouth. "Ole Judge Anderson will see about that!"

Delaney thought rapidly. Evidently this Peters faction was deeply intrenched, but the sheriff was sorely troubled by some doubt that Nampa Jack could not guess. He had run a bluff on Peters without half trying. It was up to him then to take advantage of it. He did. His hand came away from his belt with the .45 slung loosely in its grasp.

"I hold this by a right no man here can dispute," he said. "Don't try it." He moved sideways, waving the fringe of the crowd away. The sheriff took an abortive step, and halted.

"Stay just as you are a minute," ordered Nampa Jack. "I got a matter to discuss before I make up my mind to go riding." He backed away from the men for some paces, and then swung about and in half a dozen steps reached the restaurant. The screen door banged shut before one of the crowd stirred.

FOR half an hour Delaney held the eating place in undisputed possession. No one so much as ventured near the entrance, for with the uncertainty of the situation no one cared to confront Nampa Jack outlined against the light of day while the cowboy was in the relative obscurity of the interior. And Jane had promptly closed and bolted the door giving to the rear.

They talked, watchfully, Nampa Jack facing the street with the gun holster swung forward on his lap. Jane was nervous and afraid, and her first replies to his importunate demands had been angry. Aside from her fear of Saul Peters she had a natural independence that revolted at his high-handed seizure of her affairs.

But Delaney was too involved to retreat. He told her so, calmly stating that she'd have to grin and bear it; he'd got both of them so far in bad now that there was no way out. Once she had cried, the crash of the frail structure of her security was too much for her to bear. The future, dependent on this lone stranger in a town of evil men, was too doubtful to offer her hope. Nampa Jack had looked on, his face with a look of grimness that it cost him much to preserve.

That brief interlude gave her courage, and strangely, hope. She took Delaney's hand and thanked him and uttered an almost mute prayer for his safety. They sealed their pact. He was lending his guns in exchange for—for what? He never thought to inquire, of himself or of her.

"I don't know exactly what I'm going to do, ma'am—"

"You must call me Jane—now," she interrupted softly.

"Well—Jane, then." His voice was matter of fact, as though he granted a minor concession, but weirdly his heart had leaped, almost so that it pained. "I got no plans. But I do know this sheriff fella is in a bad hole, and I guess he knows it too. If he arrests me I can raise a little dust up at Phœnix myself."

"Yes, but don't you see," the girl insisted, "you won't be arrested. They will kill you—resisting arrest!"

He smiled and rose. "I know all the tricks, Jane; I can kill a few myself and sort of discourage the idea." He walked to the door. The afternoon had waned and the sun was sinking behind the far low mountains in the west. The desert was purple and mysterious and a faint coolness came in from its wastes with the approaching night. There was not a sound outside; not a soul could be seen from the restaurant doorway.

Nampa Jack knew his strength in bluffing down the sheriff. Arrest was the last thing the officer wanted. Therefore Delaney was left alone—until the opportune moment had arrived.

"I'm starting now," he said.

"Good-by, Nampa Jack," she whispered, and as she stood back in the shadow of the door one hand touched his shoulder as if she would draw strength from their erect confidence.

He turned about. "Jane! Why did you send me away from you this afternoon?"

The girl was silent, eying him wistfully. Then she said, "Come back to me, cowboy, and I'll tell you."

THE street was empty. Nampa Jack assured himself of this the moment he stepped outside. He stood motionless studying each house corner and every door. Then he stepped out along the boards of the sidewalk and walked slowly up the street.

A two-story building in the middle of its length was fronted with a wide veranda on which were several well-worn armchairs. Delaney had not needed the aid of the sign, "Washington House," to recognize it as Okalona's hostelry earlier that day. There he bent his steps and through its double screen doors he passed unmolested.

A fat, fish-mouthed man in steel spectacles sat behind the desk, busy at some accounting task which strangely seemed to affect him with nervousness. He tried to ignore the entrance of the cowboy, but the attempt was a failure. He looked up as Delaney leaned confidentially over the desk.

"I'll take a nice room with a southern exposure and view of the ocean, fella," said Nampa Jack.

"We're full up," announced the fat man after licking his lips. "Honest. Ain't got a room left."

Delaney's left hand was suddenly removed from its idle resting-place on the desk and grasped the softness of the man's neck at the back. The fingers pressed through the folds of flesh with a force that made the hotel-keeper gasp with surprise and pain.

"Give me one of the keys on that board!" ordered Nampa Jack. He screwed the man about by main force and held his gaze immovably on the almost full key rack. The fat man gurgled a protest, and then seized a key with panicky swiftness as the pressure on his neck tightened.

As Delaney walked away from the desk he glanced back once at the fat man. The latter was in a state of near collapse, which fact Delaney could well understand. The fat man had been given his orders and he had disobeyed them perforce. He would be having his reckoning with Saul Peters shortly.

The tiny room with the single bed was not hard to find up-stairs. After a brief glance outside to fix the location of the window on his mind, Delaney threw himself down on the bed to enjoy a reflective smoke. He had not encountered the sheriff again; the issue had been postponed; and he was of no mind to hurry it. His purpose now was only to kill time while the shadows rolled in from the desert to the east and night shrouded the little town in the impenetrable darkness that would precede moonrise.

It was armed truce.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Delaney descended the stairs to the lower floor again it was after nine o'clock and the night outside was black as pitch. He trod cautiously, though without hesitation. There were only two men in sight, the clerk behind the desk, a different man this time, a thin saturnine fellow who ignored him, and the new arrival of that afternoon. The latter stood before the desk in desultory conversation with the clerk.

The stranger looked up as Nampa Jack advanced across the floor, and he gave the cowboy an odd glance that awakened again the speculation in his mind. Nampa Jack felt that he could have catalogued any man who might have occasion to visit such a town as Okalona, but the identity of the newcomer was hidden behind an exterior as baffling as the rear view of a poker hand. Delaney nodded a casual "Howdy," and stopped before the cigar counter to give careful study to the brands on view.

"Well, hope you like the room all right," said the clerk with a professional air as the stranger moved off. "Wanta be called in the morning?"

"Mebby," the man replied indifferently. "Tell you later if I do. I sleep light." With that he went up-stairs and Delaney watched the clerk's eyes narrow with speculation or suspicion, or both, as the lean broad back disappeared.

"I'll have a cigar," announced Delaney.

The clerk turned, glanced briefly at the cowboy, and offered him the box without uttering a word.

"You mustn't do a rushing business here exactly," Delaney observed as he bit off the end and lighted his cigar. "You seem to take a remarkable interest in new roomers."

The clerk smiled faintly and his eyes glowed as he returned Delaney's glance. "Sometimes," he said, as the cowboy pushed open the street door, "you'd be real surprised how much personal attention they get."

The veranda of the hotel and a good section of the street before it was in comparative brilliance under the light of the two big lamps that hung from the veranda shed. Delaney could see odd gleams and patches of light up and down the street where other lamps were also hung outdoors or where they glowed behind store windows and the curtains of homes. But most of the town lay under a blanket of impenetrable darkness and the feeble light of the stars served poorly to dissipate it.

He moved out of the circle of light and walked along the center of the street. No plan offered itself to him. In his long reflection up in the room he had definitely decided that he was an utter idiot to attempt what he hoped to accomplish. And thus having settled the matter he felt free to go hunt up some plan of those he was fighting and smash it completely—which might serve his purpose fully as well.

THERE was no one before the entrance of the pool parlor, and after waiting a while just beyond the light from its windows, Nampa Jack moved deliberately and entered. This would do for a starting point. Inside were a dozen men, and silence fell upon them as they turned toward him. The leather-visaged man with the pale eyes who had drawn his attention that afternoon was idly knocking the balls about at one table. Now he put away his cue and rolled himself a cigaret.

Nampa Jack halted beside the first table and moved the balls about on the felt surface while his eyes strayed from one to the other of the uneasy assemblage. Not a word broke the silence and the nerves of the less belligerent of them were beginning to be strained by the menace of the stillness. Delaney grinned inwardly as he sensed that the odds against him were not as great as he had first anticipated.

"How's the sheriff now?" he asked at large.

A small, sharp faced man, the proprietor, by the green eyeshade and little apron which he wore with the professional air of a gambler, sought for a cue from the pale-eyed gunman. The latter stood leaning against the wall, smoking in aloof abstraction. Finding no aid, the proprietor said, "All right," and waited the next move.

"That's fine," approved Nampa Jack. "Then somebody here can talk after all. I was afraid you were all deaf and dumb."

"We're deaf on occasions," spoke up the killer, "but we're never dumb. And come to think of it, fella, I don't like the way you talk."

Nampa Jack grinned. At last! They were starting something. The man in fact came forward, and simultaneously there was a retirement of the rest of the patrons to positions of less danger. Only the proprietor remained where he stood, a tense, hawk-eyed observer.

"I come by my way of speaking natural," Nampa Jack said softly, "being born that way."

"You ain't altogether to blame then," came the reply. And ominously, "But just the same you're going to stand for it."

Nampa Jack had not stirred. One hand still toyed with an ivory ball; the other held the cigar. His eyes darted between the two, the killer and the little gambler. He drew a deep breath and sighed softly, almost happily. "I got my doubts," he said.

Immediately he moved. He shot the cigar butt across the table directly into the face of the proprietor, swung to one side, and threw his gun on the killer. He had not time for reflection. Even before he had jumped the gun of the pale-eyed man swung up, and the two explosions came as one.

The killer swayed where he stood and one hand went out to grasp the edge of the pool table. The gambler, routed momentarily by his instinctive flinching from the cigar, recovered himself—and stared into the muzzle of Nampa Jack's gun. His lips tightened grimly and his hands slowly elevated above his shoulders.

"Put 'em down," ordered Delaney curtly. "That's it. Now give your partner a hand.

The man stepped quickly to the side of the wounded bully and the fellow collapsed into his arms. He was trying vainly to get his breath, and feeble, almost soundless curses issued from his lips. His eyes held the dazed, uncomprehending look of one blind.

"Keep your hands in sight!" Delaney ordered the others. They pressed closely to the wall, a couple with the blood lust in their eyes, the rest with fear. They did not move.

"I should have plugged you too, fella," Delaney said to the little man. The latter's glare was livid with hate but he offered no speech. "You was aiming to get me, fair or otherwise. All he got is some of his own medicine. If I see you tomorrow I'll watch close—one false move and I'll snake this gun and give you all that's in it."

The little man lowered his burden to the ground with callous indifference. The killer was dying, and while the gambler was unmoved by the other's tragedy his eyes glowed with vengeful hatred for his own defeat. Delaney holstered his gun and moved backward to the door. His eyes fastened on the little proprietor as he moved, for he knew enough about men to read the treachery that was in the fellow's make-up. The latter was edging already to the rear by little steps. Something transformed his face, something that puzzled Delaney and caused him to halt as he was about to push through the door.

"You," he ordered, "stop there! Where are you going?"

The man halted willingly enough, and strangely, he leered with secret triumph. He winked—and the signal, Delaney realized with an icy feeling of defeat, went to the door over his shoulder.

"Got you, fella!" said a voice behind him. A chill pressure was applied to the small f his back. "Drop your belt."

And the throaty chuckle of Saul Peters ounded in his ear.

CHAPTER V

TWENTY minutes later Nampa Jack sat in the darkness of the single-cell adobe jail in the rear of the sheriff's ffice. With his handkerchief he wiped at cut over one eye which oozed blood slowly. is incarceration had not been accomplished ithout a certain amount of trouble.

Delaney stood up and paced back and rth in the narrow length of his confine- ent, unable to remain seated as the ought of his passage down the street re- rned to his mind. He had surrendered aceably enough, being too wise to resist, d walked along with the sheriff and a zen men. But in passing the restaurant e noise had attracted Jane Cannon, and om the doorway she had been able to ake out the nature of the party. Her ce, framed against the interior light, was o deeply in the shadows to be seen, but e hand had gone to her breast in a gesture deepest pain and dread.

And Saul Peters had laughed softly as ey went by!

There had been a scuffle immediately. laney had found a limit to his submissive- ss. He probably owed his life to the rkness and the inability of the others to oot without wounding one of their own mber. After his first surprise and anger d subsided, the sheriff seized Delaney m a dozen murderous hands and rushed n to the adobe jail. There he was own headlong into the cell, the barred r was slammed shut, and after several utes of heated discussion the crowd had gone off again into the night. Not even a jailer was left to guard him. Yet he was not entirely alone, for he knew that in this little town the eyes and ears of the entire population guarded a prisoner with a vigil more stern than any jailer. Silence, ominous and unnatural, settled about the adobe building.

What might come next Delaney had no better way of knowing than earlier that night. It was a grim business now. As well as he knew the town, knew the men who made it up, they also knew him—or thought they did. The average drifting cowboy is too canny an individual to overstay his welcome in an unfriendly town. His life is of too little consequence on the fringes of civilization for many scruples to safeguard it. When such a man has committed himself, it is always with a determined intent; there is only one way of suppressing his stubborn zeal. Equally there is only one sure way of coping with the menace of the unknown, a safe road for a troubled sheriff in a lone country. Delaney thought of that one way, and though his heart beat firmly his brain felt the chill of its meaning.

The hangman's noose!

Soon there would come a party of visitors out of the night, riding into town as though from a great distance, masked, wordless, armed to the teeth. Much of their by-play would be superfluous in a sense, but effective—who, for example, would have the courage to recognize a sheriff behind a bandanna mask? Then it would soon be over.

There came a tiny sound at the single window, merely a hole in the adobe wall with two bars set in the space, which distracted Delaney's thoughts from their somber course. He stepped back against the wall and suppressed his breathing. A single shot, or a knife, might do as well!

But there fell on his ears a whispered word that suddenly drained from Nampa Jack's being all the strength that had supported him.

"Jack!"

It was Jane!

He was beside the tiny opening in a jump, dragging the cot over the floor so that he might stand on it and lean across the width of the heavy adobe wall and press his face against the bars. "——, Jane! How dared you come here?" His voice trembled with weakness for her, where his own danger had left him unmoved. "Somebody will fire, girl, if they hear you."

"I don't care!" she whispered. He could barely make out her face in the darkness of the night; only her eyes gleamed so that he saw the intensity of feeling in their depths. "I don't care. I'm to blame. If you had gone on today you would not be in this place now. Don't you see why I sent you from me this afternoon?"

"Don't worry about me, Jane. I ain't dead yet."

"Oh, don't say that!" she protested, shuddering. "I saw them hit you. I was afraid; a shot, a knife, and you—"

"Jane girl, don't! It doesn't matter about me."

"Yes, it does!" Her voice was fierce as it whispered beside his ear. "Listen. Here is an iron bar. You can dig your way out before dawn. You can't stay. They won't try you; they intend to—to hang you. But they won't come in time; I know they won't. I have a plan."

"What?"

"Never mind. Make your way out. Then come to me; to the back of the restaurant carefully. I'll look for you." Her face moved away.

"Jane!" Nampa Jack thrust a hand through the bars. It caught one of hers on the edge of the window. "Jane—I must tell you now. I'm no damn good; I didn't go into this for any reward. I wanted to do one good thing before I cashed in, and I didn't care when that happened."

"You mustn't talk like that, Jack!" Her face came near the bars again, mysterious, forbidding of the sentiments he had uttered.

"I wanted you to know," he said. "It never mattered. Jane—!"

His lips were silenced by a moist pressure as light as the fall of dew on a blade of grass, and as overpowering as an incalculable weight. He would not speak. Only his ears heard her. "I shall pray while I am waiting through this night, Jack," she whispered.

When he could open his eyes she was gone, nor could his hungry whispers win any answers from the darkness.

THE task was an ordeal of sweating labor, of torn hands, of constant dread that the sounds he made might be heard. The sun-dried earth of the adobe wall was packed as hard as cement, and he could only attack its smooth surface by restrained blows. But a break was started, widened, deepened, and after an infinity of time the iron bar forced itself through into the outer air. He was free!

But actually he was not—not yet. The most dangerous part of all was in widening the outer opening without betraying himself. And when that was accomplished he was still unarmed, at the mercy of whatever keen-eyed individual happened to come upon him lurking about the still, darkened town. There were no scattered lights now, no passing of casual footsteps into which his own might merge. He could make out three sources of watchfulness, the pool parlor, the hotel, and a faint glow from inside the restaurant. He moved softly along the dust of the road.

The front of the pool room was empty, but inside, as he watched from the street, he could see an uncertain number of men gathered about a door leading into a rear room, inside which a larger body obviously was gathered. "Cards," Delaney said to himself, "to provide an alibi for being up late to see the fun. Tonight this town plans to enjoy its two main diversions—gambling—and killing!"

He chuckled grimly and went on. He approached the restaurant cautiously, staring into the darkness ahead till his eyes hurt, making certain with each step that he would precipitate no alarm. At a table in the rear he could make out two people in earnest conversation. They were Jane Cannon and Saul Peters.

At the back of the frame building Delaney had to proceed with redoubled care. Barrels were about, and piles of ashes and tin cans. He found the door, felt for the knob; and then—

"Freeze!" ordered a tense voice in the darkness beside him. For the second time that night Delaney felt the cold muzzle of a gun against his body. He had felt defeat then, but this time blind anger possessed him. For an instant he did not move and his muscles gathered for the spring.

"Who are you?" his captor demanded.

"Who in hell do you think?"

There was a puzzled silence. Then a soft chuckle. "Gee whiz!" apologized the voice. "I thought mebby you was Santa Claus!"

For a space of seconds Nampa Jack was held by sheer astonishment at the reply. Then a flash of understanding seized him.

"The kid!" he exclaimed in a whisper. "My God, it's the kid; and I was all set to jump you!"

"Lucky you didn't try it," came the unmoved reply. "I can handle a gun, cowboy."

"You bet you can," assured Delaney. "Glad I didn't try it. Got another one?"

"Sure." There was a scrape of leather on the ground and Jack felt a gun belt weighed down with a holstered six-gun thrust into his hands. Its pressure on his thigh was the most reassuring thing he had ever known.

There followed a whispered conference in which Delaney learned that Jane had drawn Saul Peters into the restaurant on some pretext to bargain for the life of the cowboy, or at least to detain him. The sheriff had found the meeting so pleasant that he had not stirred for nearly two hours. The kid had kept his vigil outside since the girl returned from her errand of delivery at the jail, "She wouldn't let me go," complained the boy. "I told her it wasn't a girl's job at all, but she wouldn't listen. I told her you'd be sore at a girl showin' up then, right when you needed a man."

"Sure," agreed Jack diplomatically, though his heart rose in exultation that she had chosen to come on that errand herself. "Right when he needed—!" But Delaney scarcely dared to put into words the thought, so new in his life, of what that overwhelming need was.

IT TOOK some time and infinite caution for Nampa Jack to make his way inside the kitchen and across the floor to the door leading into the dining-room. The kid remained on guard at the rear, though under protest. At the crack in the door Delaney could hear the low voices from the other side. Obviously they had been talking for a long time. There was impatience in the sheriff's voice now.

"Listen here, girl," he was saying, "I been puttin' up with your fancy whims for a long time, and I'm kinda tired of them. You gotta make up your mind one way or the other. I'm a patient man, but my patience has ended."

"But Saul," the girl protested with the air of one repeating an old tale, "you say you are patient and considerate and lots of other things—and yet you are driving me, driving me. I don't want to be driven!" Her voice trembled.

"Look what I've done. I'm sworn to uphold the law, and I've held off your father all this time. Remember, he'd go to the penitentiary at Florence for ten years. And mebby I couldn't even save him for that. You know what they do to rustlers in this country, Jane!"

"Yes! Oh, God!" she cried softly in prayer. "I am little, so weak. Saul—" she hesitated and the anguish in her voice, if only simulated, was superb acting—"would you be kind to me, if I—if I married you?"

"Jane—girl!" There was a scraping sound as of a chair being moved, and then another, a tiny despairing gasp.

It was enough. The heat of killing rage was on Nampa Jack's temples as he burst through the door and flung himself toward the table across which the ungainly form of Saul Peters leaned in elephantine courtship.

They came together immediately. The sheriff leaped back from the table as Jack rushed and the two men grappled in a mighty collision. There was no time for blows or for guns. Delaney's hands sought for the other's throat and the long arms of Saul Peters clutched for a throwing grip on the cowboy's body. The girl shrank away from them as they overturned tables and chairs in their fierce conflict.

A measure of calmness returned to Nampa Jack when he realized the strength of his adversary, and he ceased to fight with the berserk anger that had sent him into the room. Saul Peters was an iron-muscled man and his back strained with the effort he made to drag the cowboy off his feet. He came near to succeeding.

But Delaney suddenly abandoned his hold on the man's throat. He threw his hands behind to balance himself and brought his head down with battering force into the sheriff's face. The blow told: Peters grunted deeply with anguish and his embrace weakened. Then Nampa Jack used his hands once more. They struck the sheriff in turn; one at the side of his neck and the other full on his face. Peters' grip relaxed completely as he sought to recover. He was unable to right himself, another short-arm punch caught him below the heart and he went back into the corner of the room with a crash.

Nampa Jack stood breathing heavily in the center of the floor. Peters glared up at him and his face was repulsive with rage. "Damn you!" he grated. "Damn your soul, I'll get you—!" His hand pawed at the gun in his belt.

Delaney had his choice of two moves. He heard the sound of running feet outside and chose; his gun flashed out and spat flame once. The oil-lamp on the table leaped and crashed to the floor, plunging the room in blind darkness.

Immediately he dove for the kitchen door, his hand going out to grasp the girl against the wall and thrust her before him. A jet of flame came from the floor, aimed at the place he had occupied an instant before. Delaney snapped a chance shot into the dark, whirled and fired twice through the screen door, and retreated into the kitchen.

"Jack!" Jane clung to his arm. "Are you mad? Why didn't you stay hidden? Now they'll hunt you down without mercy!"

"Let 'em come!" Delaney spoke between set teeth, still breathing deeply. "I'll meet them more than half-way. I've been stalling so far. Now I'm through—that was too much. The next guy I mix with gets plugged without asking. I'll try this no mercy business myself."

"Hey!" came an urgent whisper. "Shut up and get outa this place pronto. They'll be around the back in a second!" The boy, tense and thrilled to the core, had slipped inside.

"Go," said Jane. "Quickly." She pushed him toward the door.

"You're coming with me," Jack stated flatly.

"You crazy, cowboy?" demanded the boy. "She'll get shot out there. I'm coming with you."

"Like hell!" snapped Delaney in sudden decision. "You both stay here. I'll have to come back for you when I've cleaned this town out." He paused, hand on the door jamb. "So long. I'll be back for breakfast." Without further word he was gone into the night.

THE street, between the restaurant and the pool parlor, was a confusion of men running, shouting, brandishing guns. The sheriff stood on the doorstep of the eating place gesturing with his .45 and scattering the bunched men with snarled orders. Then he disappeared inside.

The hotel lights had been darkened. Only a tiny gleam came from inside at the desk. But it was brilliant enough to reveal a dim outline moving stealthily in the street. Nampa Jack froze. At first he could hear nothing and the shadow moved and melted with the darkness. But then the soft sound of footsteps scraped near by—and ceased. Still Delaney did not move.

"Don't hold your breath too long, fella," chuckled a voice. "That's what folks die from."

Jack made one swift move and he crouched with gun held out before him. "What's your game? Quick; you're covered."

"Put it away," the man advised. "If I wanted to get you I had plenty chance already."

After a second of doubt this seemed so irrefutable to Delaney that he flushed in the darkness and holstered the gun. "You're right there," he admitted, "but I'm kind of sensitive tonight." He reflected a second. "You're the man who arrived today, ain't you?"

"Yes. Mighty exciting town you got here. I never saw such a place for meanness and fighting. I couldn't sleep nohow."

Delaney chuckled grimly. He could make out the figure of the man now as his eyes became more accustomed to the dark. "Speaking as one stranger to another, fella, I'd advise you to get back into the hotel and stay in your room."

"Why?"

"Well, I got curious too, and now that howling mob yonder is bent on stringing me to a tree. I only arrived this afternoon myself."

The man did not speak for a moment. Then his voice came softly, "Mebby I'm more than curious, son. I been observing things for myself, and—well now, I can sling a gun fair to middling, too. I'll stick around if you don't mind. What's going to happen next?"

The proposal was a little too opportune for Nampa Jack to accept without some doubt. This fellow, he reflected, had an ax to grind somewhere. Then the thought came to him that there were worse things than grinding axes. "That's what I been trying to find out," he said. "Let's go see."

"No," the stranger declared. "Figure it out for yourself. You'll just get shot up doing anything like that. You got only one thing to do, hide out till morning."

"Sure—and I'd last as long in daylight in this town as a slick-eared yearling."

"I got a hunch otherwise," said the man. He spoke quietly, but the assurance in his voice was that of conviction.

"How come?"

"Well—" the other paused reflectively. "There's several reasons, son. You do as I say and we'll pull out of this on top. Hide out tonight, and stay under cover till I get you in the morning. Now," he insisted as Jack spoke in protest, "you have no choice. Don't be a bigger damn fool than you are already, bucking this town. Where do you aim to spend the night?"

Indecision held Delaney silent. The man was right beyond a doubt. Yet it was hard to face the realization of his helplessness. He had been buoyed up by a recklessness that considered no consequences. It had been his best weapon, confusing and mystifying his enemies—and even yet he had the feeling that one swift fight, if he emerged alive, would finish the matter.

"I don't know!" he said aloud. But some remnant of common sense fell upon his burning spirit and left it suddenly cold. No getting away from it, the man was right. And he would serve Jane Cannon but poorly by getting himself killed. He had much to do for her yet.

"I'll do it," he declared. "I figure the last place any of them will look for me will be in my room at the hotel. I'll shinny up into the window."

"Fine. I'll sort of attract attention down the street a ways in the meantime. Remember now—stay there till I come for you in the morning." He moved off into the night, a soundless shadow.

It was only later, when he was trying to quiet his racing brain for sleep on the little iron bed in his room, that Delaney remembered he had not even asked the stranger his name.

CHAPTER VI

NAMPA JACK DELANEY awoke in the thin light of a new day. He was wide-eyed and alert in an instant, listening intently before rising from his bed. He crept to the window. The world outside was gray and cool and silent. Not a soul was about the streets of Okalona; the town seemed lost in slumber after the prolonged excitement of the night before. But Jack was not deceived by this. He could see the faint smoke of kitchen fires rising slowly from a few chimneys near him, and he knew the stillness of the dawn might be only the calm before a gruesome morning of battle and death.

But he had said he would be at the restaurant with the coming of day. It was a quixotic promise; he had given it while his brain surged with the desperate intent of seeking out the killers of the town and accomplishing victory or death. He had also promised to remain here till the stranger came for him—or at least had remained silent when told to do so. He recalled that strange conversation, wondering deeply at the mysterious motives of the man. Delaney feared no treachery; the affair fell far short of the subtleties of plot and counterplot; but he shrewdly sensed that the stranger's aid was not disinterested. He had offered no explanation, and while Delaney was grateful, he did not exactly feel indebted to the man.

Whether or not Nampa Jack remained in the hotel was his own business. And after the turmoil and shooting of the night—for the town had remained awake, nervous and silent except for occasional shots and cries as the grim hunt went on—Delaney had a very important reason for leaving his hiding place immediately. What had happened in the little restaurant?

Well, he would keep his first promise, and then— He shrugged his shoulders ironically and drew on his boots.

The floor boards of the frame hotel were not new and they creaked as he stepped out into the hall. He walked carefully, planting his feet close to the wall, and reached the stairs without any sound of alarm. Down the flight he went, resting his weight on the banisters so that his descent was soundless. Close to the bottom he peered into the little lobby.

In one of the chairs at a front window a man was relaxed in deep slumber. His head was thrown back and his face was visible in the thin daylight. It was the hotel porter obviously, a boozy, grim figure in ancient clothing.

Carefully Delaney navigated the floor. Once he halted for a breathless moment after a loose board creaked loudly enough to awaken the dead. The man in the chair stirred but did not come to life. On the cowboy went, step by step. He reached the door, opened it, and breathed deeply with relief when it was closed behind him.

As he had done the night before he cast all caution aside and walked down the main street. It was as wise a course as any, after all, for the stores and saloons would probably be empty and safe, while the curtained windows of the dwellings held only menace.

He stole around to the rear of the restaurant and listened. Inside some one moved about and the sound of pans and crockery came through the thin walls. Jack threw a handful of pebbles at the door and drew back. The sounds ceased. The door opened cautiously and Jane stepped into the morning light. She was pale and her eyes were full of mingled pain and courage.

"Jane!" he cried softly.

Her hand flew to her breast as she turned, as though the sound of his voice had the power to make her heart cease beating. "Nampa Jack!" she whispered. "They didn't find you. Oh, thank God!"

"Not yet, girl, they didn't," he assured her. He followed into the kitchen and shut the door behind him. She halted in the center of the room, hands clasped, staring at him hungrily. In his breast something began to burn in the silence that came as their eyes held each other. It mounted in him, something tender and fierce at once.

"Jane—honey!" he said uncertainly. He stepped toward her. And though her breath came faster and twin spots rose on the pallor of her cheeks, she did not speak.

There came a sound of stealthy movement outside and a knocking at the door. Delaney whirled, the gun in his hand with reflex movement. His emotions revolted to fury inside him. "Damn you!" he grated. "Say your name—quick!"

"Hey, cowboy, let me in," demanded the voice. "It's me, Dave."

With a gasp of relief the girl darted to the door and admitted the boy. She leaned weakly against it as it closed.

"Lissen," Dave said breathlessly, "you just come in, didn't you?"

Grim faced, Delaney nodded.

"Well, the porter up at the hotel saw you. I'm sure he did. You musta arrived here just as I left the stable. I saw him chase outa the hotel and go lopin' up the street like he carried a hot dollar. He saw you—and he's going to call up Saul Peters!"

Delaney shrugged his shoulders. His self-control returned as he realized his need for it once more. The issue would be decided in the dawn; he was discovered and must leave here, must leave Jane just when he had found her again!

But he grinned, grinned widely if none too cheerfully. "Man, they must be worried about me," he chuckled. "Not even waitin' for breakfast!"

"Your horse is ready," Jane said. "Dave has had him standing in the livery-yard for hours."

"Yep," assured the boy, "you can make it now before he comes, and that mare will carry you away faster than anything in this town."

Nampa Jack sat down in a chair and pushed aside the utensils that crowded a table. "Kid," he said firmly, "I ain't accustomed to riding before breakfast. Besides, I got a date before I leave Okalona, a date with Sheriff Peters. You go inside and watch for me. And Jane girl, scatter a few eggs on a pan while I'm waiting."

Jane waited for no further discussion but moved swiftly and efficiently beside the range. Delaney told her briefly of the events of the preceding night and of his puzzling encounter with the stranger. She said but little, sitting in a chair opposite him while he ate, watching him as though it was the last time her eyes would ever behold him again.

Dave returned. He stood framed in the morning as the door burst open, breathless and pale with the drama of his news.

"Saul Peters is comin'!"

Jane rose in silence beside the little table. There was no weakness in the grave set of her mouth. Jack came near.

"I'm going," he said simply. He tried to smile and did not altogether succeed, but the girl responded to his effort and her eyes shone with faith and encouragement.

"I'll be waiting," she told him. Her hands went out and she suddenly drew him to her fiercely while his own arms went about her shoulders. She looked up, and softly, tenderly, never as though it were the tremendous thing it was, their lips met. They shut their eyes and momentarily the world of terror they inhabited was gone.

Then she pushed him gently from her. "Come back," she ordered; her voice broke, took new strength again, "and—stay a long time, cowboy!"

He tore himself from her, hitched his belt well to the front, and plunged out through the door; and the sound of her last words went with him, ringing in his ears.

AS HE stopped at the corner of the frame building that fronted on the street, peering along the sidewalk, Jack felt a moment of admiration for the courage of Saul Peters. The man was advancing deliberately on the restaurant—alone. Only the shaken hotel porter skulking behind corners as he followed.

Nampa Jack took a deep breath, as if about to jump into an icy pool, and stepped out from the shelter of the building. He faced the oncoming man erect and still, with the tense immobility of a coiled spring. He was waiting. The sheriff halted; his eyes burned and his face was ugly with cruel wrath. His right hand snapped to the holster on his thigh. Not a word did he utter.

Both guns exploded together. The two men were fifty feet apart and they shot to kill. But through the haze of black powder smoke each saw the other erect, saw the successive streaks of flame that darted from the midst of the smoke. Deliberately they emptied their guns.

Delaney felt the click of the hammer as it fell on an exploded shell, and he stood numbly waiting for the shocking blow of a .45 slug in his body. None came. He peered through the thinning haze.

Saul Peters stood before him. But never more would Saul Peters draw trigger. His big frame was bent awkwardly, fighting that which crept over his body, which covered his eyes with the glaze of death. A stubborn undefeated will kept the body erect after life had deserted it, after the agony of its passing had made hideous his face. In sudden defeat it gave way, and Saul Peters slumped forward on the planks of the sidewalk.

Then beyond the body of the sheriff, confident in his safety now that the cowboy stood with empty gun, leered the lustful face of the hotel porter. A .45 was in his hand and it rose in deliberate aim.

It was not fired. The sharp crack of a .38 echoed from a corner of the restaurant and the porter screamed with fright and pain as he clutched at one arm. He dropped the pistol and fled headlong between two buildings.

"Damn!" came a deeply chagrined voice. Young Dave stepped out on the sidewalk. "I only winged him!"

Up the street a head appeared abruptly at a window; elsewhere another. A door was flung open and a man leaped out in stocking feet, gun in hand. Others followed, like minor actors who had been awaiting their cue. Nampa Jack threw out the empty shells and reloaded. "Beat it, kid," he ordered sharply. "Git!" Flight was out of the question. Guns were being borne from all directions in eager hands. He had but one chance—this gang had no leader; on his nerve depended his life.

The foremost of the running men halted before the menace of his half-raised gun. Others fell into a semicircle about him as he backed against the restaurant wall. Some one clutched suddenly at Dave's arm, and before the boy could resist, jerked him to one side and disarmed him.

"Back," warned Delaney. "It was a fair fight. The law had nothing to do with this."

"By God, you're gonna hang for that, fella!" shouted a huge bristle-bearded man. "Drop that gun!"

"The first man that moves a step nearer dies," grated the cowboy. "None of you could shoot me fast enough to stop the bullet I got for him."

The crowd held back. They had all the instinctive desire of a mob to take their victim alive and rend him at their leisure. But by the same token they waited for some one to direct their vengeance, and no leader appeared. There was little of fear in their hesitation, but much indecision.

The door of the restaurant slammed open and Jane rushed down the steps. Her anxiety, wordless and terrible, carried her irresistibly through the ring of men. She flung herself on the cowboy and turned fiercely on the gang. "You beasts!" she cried. "Oh, you murderers!" She sought to shield with her slim body the man who was now more precious to her than life itself.

"Git away," snarled the big man. "Damn that wench; somebody drag her off!"

Another diversion came on the scene before irresolution could be swept aside by blood lust. Down the street, running with a long six-gun in his hand, came the stranger from the hotel. He glanced briefly at the body of the sheriff in passing and burst on the cordon of men, knocking them heedlessly aside.

"Back!" he snapped in a voice of steely hardness. It was a voice accustomed to command. "Put up those guns." His own swung in the face of the others with a gesture of authority.

"What the hell business you got here?" demanded the bristle-bearded man. He advanced on the newcomer.

"This'll do!" The stranger turned aside his coat lapel. "I'm Daniel Stone—United States Marshal."

There was a moment of immobility, a space of incredulous silence. Then came uneasiness and as the cold ferocity in the marshal's eyes did not waver, a movement of retreat. The badge of a federal marshal in that wild country commanded a respect that not even the Apaches had been able to win.

"Wait a minute," the marshal ordered. "What happened here?" He turned to Nampa Jack, who was staring in astonishment, unable to think consecutively at this incredible turn.

"Lissen, marshal," cut in the big man, "this feller killed our sheriff; he murdered him in cold blood. We was arresting him. He deserves hangin'; he killed another man last night. We all saw both killin's." He turned on the cowboy. "You bloody gunman, "you'll get yours now, by ——!"

"Easy," cautioned Marshal Stone. "I saw a lot of that myself. How did this happen this morning?"

"He shot him from the corner of the building," shouted one man. "Sheriff Peters was comin' down to arrest him and he threw down on him without warnin'. He's an escaped prisoner!"

"Oh!" gasped Jane. "Oh; you killers!—" She could scarcely speak in the storm of emotion that gripped her frail body. She left the cowboy's side and advanced on the accuser. The girl was transfigured by the terror that made her fight for the man she loved; no longer was she the wistful girl of the restaurant. "Oh, you cold-blooded liar! Where were you when it happened, Tim Rogers? In your house, that's where you were, and you can't testify to a second of it." She faced the marshal. "But I can," she cried. "I saw it all from the restaurant window. I'll testify—and the word of a woman still means something to honorable men in this country."

She paused. "You know how Sheriff Peters acted toward this cowboy," she went on with quiet intensity. "You were there to see it. Peters planned to lynch him last night. He abandoned all fairness and outlawed his authority. Jack Delaney shot him down in fair fight—and in self-defense."

"You vixen!" snarled the big man. "You'll see. No man can throw a gun on a lawful officer in this town and claim self-defense."

"You can't get away from the fact that he shot and killed a sheriff in pursuit of his duty!" the man named Rogers cried passionately.

"Now listen here," commanded Marshal Stone with icy calm, "you fellas are getting excited over something you don't know so much about. First of all, I'm placing this Nampa Jack under technical arrest. So put up your guns before they get you in trouble with a federal officer in charge of a prisoner." His advice was accepted perforce and all weapons disappeared. They stood in grim silence, their whole determination centered on the charge of murder now that direct action was denied them.

"I rode into Okalona yesterday afternoon," said the marshal, "and I had chance to observe the events leading up to this killing. I didn't expect it to come so soon, but I did see it on the way. In the first place, Sheriff Peters tried to run a bluff not on this cowboy but on *me*." He paused while this statement sank into his audience.

"How come?" a surly voice demanded.

"Because he thought Delaney was the officer he was tipped off to expect."

"Expect an officer!"

"You bet he did." The marshal's voice was menacing. "And maybe a few of you know why. His goose was cooked complete. He was desperate. He couldn't find out whether to expect marshal, ranger, Pinkerton man or what. That's why the cowboy had him buffaloed. And that's why, when he couldn't find out, he planned the one sure way to remove the danger Delaney represented to him. He planned murder behind the immunity of his office."

"That's a lie!" snarled the big man.

"Is it? You trying the same thing too? You looking for a fight?"

The man shrank in spite of himself; his face colored with baffled anger. "No, I ain't fightin' you, Marshal, but what you just said ain't so, and you can't prove it nohow."

The marshal drew forth a document from an inner pocket. "This cowboy," he said meaningly, "shot and killed a criminal in self-defense. If you want to put it that way, this county has been without a sheriff since three o'clock yesterday afternoon, when I arrived in town. Read that."

The big man read, and so did the others who crowded about him. And no one had a further word to say, for the document was a warrant signed by Federal Judge Samson of the United States District Court for the arrest of one Saul Peters, accessory after the fact in the hold-up of the U. S. Mails on a Southern Pacific train and the murder of a mail clerk.

"We caught the gang two days ago down at Dos Hermanos," went on the marshal dryly, "and their gratitude for Sheriff Peters' assistance was plumb touching."

CHAPTER VII

THE warming sound of frying bacon and the fragrance of boiling coffee filtered in through the kitchen door and made the little restaurant a place of cheer and peace. Marshal Stone leaned back from the hearty breakfast he had eaten with undisturbed appetite. Nampa Jack sat at the table nervously rolling a cigaret, and Dave Cannon occupied a third chair in silent admiration of both men.

"It's not strictly legal," admitted the marshal, "but anyway these fellas has been too thick with Peters to want any further action. You haven't a thing to worry about should they insist, but they won't."

"I wish I'd known," Delaney said; "I'd have stayed under cover this morning as you asked me. I thought it was a personal fight and nothing else."

"Forget it," advised Marshal Stone succinctly. "You saved the government money. I'm the one who should have prevented it, but Peters was tangling himself up so comfortable I hadn't the heart to disturb him. I'm not worrying; we had enough on him to hang him. And," he added dryly, "you ain't forgetting how he treated Miss Cannon here, are you?"

The hand that held the cigaret trembled slightly. Delaney's mouth grew thin. "No, I'm not forgetting that."

Daniel Stone smiled to himself with an air of satisfaction. He glanced at young Dave. "Jack," he said, "while you're at it you might give somebody else a share of the credit too." The boy flushed and grinned in a mixture of embarrassment and happiness. Stone went on, "Dave here wrote a letter to the governor about Peters. Lucky it fell into the hands of some one with brains enough to use it. It was passed on to us federal men. There was a lot about rustling and such that we didn't bother with, but he mentioned a few facts concerning the hold-up that showed us the connection we had never even thought of. A tip was all we needed; we got to work and found that our friend Peters was backing that gang and protecting them and taking his share. He was a little too ambitious for one man. And when we rounded up that crowd at Dos Hermanos they talked enough to hang Peters six times. Dave," he said, turning to the boy, "I'm going to make it my business to see you get in on that reward money."

Nampa Jack held out a hand. "Shake, Dave. I sure admit I made an awful mistake when I tried to run a sandy on you yesterday."

"It wasn't anything," protested the boy. "I kinda made a mistake myself about you."

"How come?"

"Well—" the boy paused and eyed Delaney—"when you asked me for your gun yesterday I was doggone glad to get it. But right away I went and found a good-sized board and kept it handy too."

"A board? What for?"

"To carry you back on."

The marshal laughed outright and Nampa Jack tried hard to look stern. The boy grinned with bland satisfaction at his foresight.

"Kid," said Stone, "I'll see that you get a marshal's badge when you come of age. We need fellas who can remember details so careful." He rose from the table. "Delaney, that reminds me; you come up to the hotel later and I'll swear you in as deputy. There's work to be done yet and I need your kind. Come on, kid."

"I'll see you later, Marshal," assured Dave.

Daniel Stone halted and fixed the boy with a frowning eye. "Youngster," he declared regretfully, "your attention to details is plumb undeveloped after all." His glance followed Delaney's eyes to the kitchen door, whence they had traveled in ill-suppressed nervousness a dozen times already. "Delaney here," said Stone, "has some strictly private business to attend to or I'm a two-head calf. You comin', kid?"

Left alone, Nampa Jack moved to the door which held his whole attention. Gently he knocked on the panels. Not a sound came in answer. He pushed it open and entered, his heart beating unmercifully in his breast.

Across the room he saw her. She had been standing by the door looking out over the miles of barren country lighted by the brief splendor of the morning sun. She turned now and faced him. For an instant they stood thus in silence while all the world seemed stilled. Her slim hands were on her breast and they rose and fell with her breathing as though she sought vainly to imprison under them the emotions that stirred mightily about her heart. Her lips were half open with unsaid words, moist and red and waiting.

The cowboy crossed the humble kitchen with steps that were not conscious movement. Nampa Jack had found his Golden Fleece, his Holy Grail, and for him the long trail was ended.

Beginning with the February issue

Everybody's takes great pride in Announcing a New Novel by

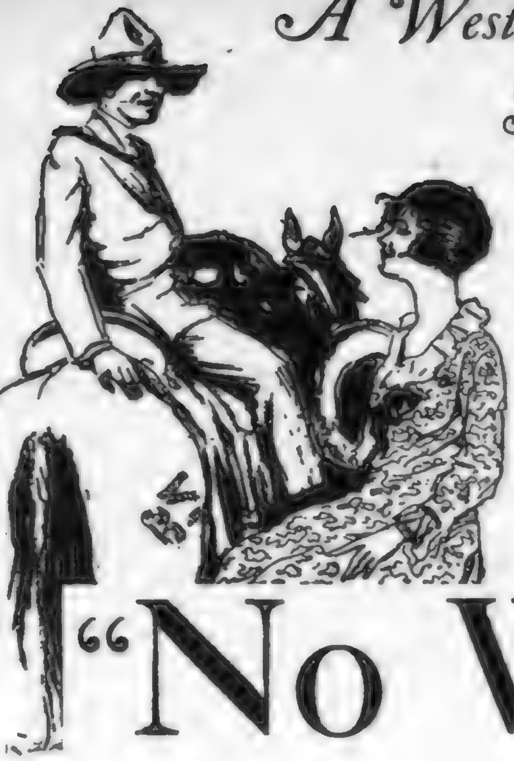
Beatrice Grimshaw

"Black Sheep's GOLD"

It is a novel of a hunt for treasure in that most primitive of countries, Papua, where head-hunters combine with every handicap of nature to entrap the "black sheep" . . . . . and the girl he loves.

Be Sure to Buy the February Everybody's

A Western Story of Decidedly Humorous Character



NOME *means* "No Women"

By Charles Wesley Sanders

"THAT fella Bob Chase is the mos' reckless son-of-a gun that ever hit this here Oregon country. He can raise more devilment in a minute than a man ought to raise in a minute and a half. He ain't got no sense about money. Works few months, saves his pay—then, whoo-e-e, off to town. And what does he get out of a trip to town? Not a thing! All goes over the gamblin' table or for licker. He hardly ever wins gamblin', an' he don't really care for licker his own self. Buys it for every Tom, Dick, an' Joe that happens along. Well!"

Down Home Harney delivered the verdict. He was sitting on his spurs in front of the bunkhouse of a Sunday morning. Those about him concurred in the verdict by nods of their heads, all except one. That one was Tennessee Wiley. He was a dark-haired, dark-eyed, serious faced chap. Of all those men he was the only one who did not now rest himself by sitting or squatting. He stood erect. Also he was the only one who did not join in criticism of that fella Bob Chase. Since he was the direct opposite of Chase, he had studied him, and he had sometimes wondered whether Chase's way was not better than his own. Chase seemed to get a good deal of fun out of life.

"Wouldn't be surprised," he said, "if Bob Chase wasn't fixin' to go to town right now."

"Reckon not," Down Home said. "It is only a few weeks since he was to town."

"Seen him packin' his sack jes' the same," Tennessee Wiley declared. "He went in to see Mr. Roberts, too."

"Packin' his sack," Down Home wondered. "Yuh suppose that doggoned fool is figurin' on blowin'?"

"Here he comes," Tennessee answered. "You can ask him."

There he came, that Bob Chase. He came steppin' light an' easy, and the customary smile on his lips. It was not a mirthful smile, never had been. It was thin, and it gave just a suggestion of a twist to Bob Chase's lips. And it was confined to the lips. It did not touch the very dark eyes at all. Men had seen that smile on Chase's lips when he should have been merry, and they had seen it on his lips when he should have been angry. It was in fact a hard smile, the smile of a hard, self-reliant man.

Chase came on to the men; and though

there was no reason why he should do so, his eyes swept from one to the other. Habit with Chase, men said. He was always sizing things up. Reckless though he might be, careless, never saying anything, working hard for money just to blow it in, he was nevertheless an observant man. Riding home from town, for instance, he would remark on this and that, trivial things which had escaped the eyes of the other men. That sweeping glance of his took in a great deal.

What was there back of Chase's masklike face nobody knew. To the outward eye, he was a handsome, lithe, fast-moving youngster. But beyond that nobody had ever got a line on him. Where he had come from, even, nobody knew. His speech was a mixture which he had seemed to pick up here and there. Tennessee Wiley had not been on the ranch for a month, for instance, before Chase was using some of Tennessee's phrases as naturally as Tennessee himself used them. He would say "right now" in relation to an event gone by, and a man had no longer gone; he had "done gone". Clever, quick, Chase was, all these men thought. But what a doggoned fool about everything.

Yet in spite of the mask he wore, he didn't seem to be stuck on himself. No false pride there! Why, he would even let his associates question him about his intimate, personal affairs. Of course he usually gave answers that were no answers at all, but that didn't matter. So Down Home had no hesitation in shooting it right at him now.

"Hear you are hittin' it for town, Bob," Down Home suggested.

"Ridin' right through her," said Chase. "Never stoppin'. Before they know I have hit the burg, they will say I have done gone."

"Mebbe you are goin' to Portland," said Down Home. "Some little trip. You goin' to ride your hoss all the way?"

He would undoubtedly ride his horse all the way. This was before the heart of Oregon had been pierced by railroad steel, and he would have his choice of his own horse or a horse-drawn stage.

"Dunno if I will hit Portland or not," said Chase, rather languidly.

Well, here was somethin' all right. Didn't know if he would hit Portland? Sounded like he was goin' through Portland or some other place up north there.

"You ain't figgerin' on goin' clear to Seattle?" Down Home hazarded.

"I'm figgerin' on *startin'* from Seattle," Chase said. "I hear that is the place a fella *starts* from."

All of them studied Chase's face at that. His expression was no different from what it usually was. The thin smile was there, but the eyes were still and grave.

"Oh, yes, I know; you are goin' to Canada," said Down Home. "Well, they say that it is quite a country. I met a fella once that had been up there. I hear they have some cattle and lots of horses. What you goin' to do in Canada, Bob?"

"I dunno if I go through Canada or not," Chase answered. "Mebbe I leave Seattle on a boat and don't touch no land again till I get up there. Gosh, Down Home, on a long journey a man does well if he gets away to a good start, doesn't he?"

"Well, I wish that old grouch would say dinner was ready," Down Home declared, rising from his squatting position. "I'm gettin' hungry."

With which statement Down Home started to walk away. He took only two steps, however. Chase arrested him.

"Nome is where I'm goin'," said Chase.

"No Ma'am?" Down Home asked. "Well, that might suit you all right. I ain't never heard of you havin' no truck with women."

"It is a place," said Chase. "It is a city. It is a teeming city just now."

Well, now, teeming! That wasn't no natural word. That was the kind of a word a man got out of a book or a paper. There was something strange about all this. Down Home turned back and faced Chase.

"Let's have it," he said. "Don't be bashful. Get off your heels, men. Let's take it standing up."

"I met this here Sam Trimble that rides for Somers, the other day," Chase said, in the historical manner. "He had been to town, and he had seen a newspaper. Gold has been struck in this here Nome. Well, I don't expect it is right in the heart of the city. I expect you have to go out in the sage a ways to find it. Anyhow there is a great rush of people up thataway. The paper said it was one of the richest gold strikes in the his'try of gold strikin'. I expect that is puttin' it kind of strong. I don't expect they is as much gold way up there as there was in Californy in 'forty-nine. It must be a colder climate, and I don't expect gold would do as well as it would down south. Anyhow, from that I gather, all you need is some salt meat, a pick, a shovel, and a pan. Then you go out and gather in your gold. I think I can spend mebbe a week up there and be fixed for life."

"You will be sick on that boat ride," Down Home warned him. "Then you will freeze your feet. You will have chilblains, corns, and bunions all the rest of your life. A man can't take no comfort with a good crop of corns, let alone bunions and chilblains to go with them."

"One nugget will buy a lot of corn plasters," Chase averred.

"An' mebbe you will get murdered and robbed of your gold," Down Home said.

"On the other hand I might murder some other fella an' take his gold away from him," Chase said, as he turned into the bunkhouse.

Topics for discussion on a ranch have always been few, and so Chase's projected trip, fantastic though it was, was talked about all that afternoon. It was talked about under the oil lamp in the bunkhouse till the men could no longer keep awake. In Chase's presence, as if he had not been there, they discussed whether he really intended to take any such trip. Some thought he wouldn't. Tennessee Wiley declared he would. Down Home conceded that he might.

"You gotta remember that the doggone fool never figured the chances against him," Down Home said, and that was an argument that couldn't be controverted.

Thought of the project and the argument about it which had ensued almost but not quite kept the men from going to sleep. When they awoke in the twilight of mornings, they first beheld Tennessee Wiley sitting on the edge of his bunk, gazing rather mournfully at a boot which he held in his hand.

"Where's Chase?" Down Home asked.

"He said, 'Luck, hell! There ain't no such thing as luck. All a man has to do is to keep on goin. There ain't a thing that can stop me between here and Nome, whereever that is. I got nearly two hundred dollars. The old man paid me off, and he gimme fifty dollars besides. I could go round the world on two hundred dollars. Compared to that, Nome is just a step.'"

"Well," Down Home conceded, "Bob Chase has always been a pretty good stepper. I'm thinkin' he will have to step some now!"

CHAPTER II

BOB CHASE knew, rather indefinitely as a man generally does, what was back of his masklike face. He knew that inside of him there was something to which he had always been a slave. That was an urge to move. Motion! Gosh, there wasn't nothing like motion. When he had been in one place for a certain length of time, he felt as if he had been put out at the end of a picket rope. He couldn't bear to be tied out like that. Unlike a horse, he knew that a rope couldn't hold him. So he had moved through the cattle country, through many states, seeking to discover what was around the next corner, so he had remained on this job much longer than he had ever remained anywhere before. He had relieved his restlessness by frequent trips to town, trips from which he returned in a dilapidated condition financially. He had, however, a wiser head than most people thought. Instead of drawing his meager pay in full each month, he left a little of it with the old man. Therefore, with the fifty which the old man had given him, since the old man, being himself very stable, liked him, he was better heeled than he had been in a long time. Nome? Huh, he would have three-quarters of his stake left when he got to Nome. He knew how to travel cheaply on land, and he would work on that boat. He didn't know what a man did on a boat, but men of course did something; and he could do whatever any other man could do. Unless he was a sucker, he wouldn't pay his fare to no place, and he didn't believe he was a sucker. 'Course, as men said, he was reckless, but he could curb that recklessness when he had a job of work to do.

It had still been dark when he had slipped out of his bunk and slipped into his clothes. His war sack was all packed. His horse had been kept up through the night. Saddle and bridle were at his hand. He would be on his way in a minute.

He was sifting toward the door in the gloom when Tennessee Wiley stopped him with a whisper. Tennessee said he just wanted to bid him good-by and good luck, and the two men groped in the dark and found each other's hands. Chase liked the

Tennesseean. He liked the looks of him. He liked his seriousness. He had liked to listen to Wiley's stories of the Tennessee hills, of the red clay, of the gunmen down there, of the fatal feuds. So, though he gripped Tennessee's hand hard, he responded to his good wishes as Tennessee later quoted him. That was the fashion.

So now, well after sun-up, Chase rode north. It was going to be a hot day. Well, he would soak in the heat. He might need a lot of it where he was going. He thought for a while of Nome, but there was nothing definite in that thinking. Nome was a shadowy place in the shadows of his brain. Let 'er slide. She would be real enough by-and-by. So he thought of Tennessee Wiley. He liked that queer Southerner. Doggoned, when he got his stake, he would come back, and him and Tennessee would go into the cattle business together. There wasn't as much as there might be to this here jammin' around. He'd settle down and him and Tennessee would have a good, sociable time. They'd have men to do the work. From what Tennessee had told him, Tennessee hadn't ever had a very good time. Shack in the hills, his mammy, his pappy, queer people. Not much to eat. By gosh, wouldn't he open that fella's eyes after a while? Oh, yes, Bob Chase's heart was in the right place, and, surprisingly perhaps, he was something of a dreamer.

HE HAD his breakfast while the horse walked on. The cook had put up some food for him the night before, and since he had a long way to travel, there was no use in his alighting till such time as he could find a little grass and water for the animal. A cigaret going after breakfast, he settled himself in the saddle.

He rode on for a while and then he suddenly came erect. His eyes had caught sight of a tent pitched perhaps a quarter of a mile back from the road. Beside the tent was a wagon which had certainly seen better days and those far distant. It was a very tired sort of wagon; it seemed to lean in on itself as if it rested.

Chase knew what that meant. He had heard that some homesteaders were coming in here. Poor people. Very! They arrived in a wagon like that and they put up a tent. They carried water from afar. At first they were going to make a home here, but generally they wearied of the effort and moved listlessly on.

Chase supposed this outfit would be moving on soon. It didn't look prosperous.

"Well, hoss, suppose we get erlong for a while."

SUPPOSING himself alone in this vastness, he spoke the words aloud. Then, ashamed to have been caught as if he were talking to himself, he clamped his lips. For once the habitual smile had gone from his face. But in spite of that the face was not so hard as it usually was, for ahead of him, at the roadside, stood a woman; Chase, as Down Home had said, hadn't had much truck with women. So all he had for them was a grave courtesy. He knew his smile was hard. It was nothing to confront a woman with. So he wiped it from his lips.

He did not start the horse as he had intended to do. Instead he let the animal go forward at the walk. As he drew nearer, he saw that it was not a woman who stood at the roadside but a girl, and, by gosh, she was a kind of a pretty girl, too. Well, not pretty exactly. Chase's vocabulary was limited enough generally and it was especially limited where women were concerned. He groped for a word to describe this girl, but he didn't find it. If he had found it, it would doubtless have been "appealing."

She was bareheaded in spite of the heat, and she wore a simple calico dress which came almost to the ground. Brown hair was coiled about her head, and brown eyes were lifted to Chase's face. He knew she wanted to speak to him, and an innate though generally well hidden gentleness suddenly ruled him. He stopped the horse just before he reached her, and he took off his hat.

"Yes, ma'am," he said gravely and gently.

He thought she breathed a sigh of relief. There was, anyhow, a sudden rise and fall of her bosom. Her eyes widened and then became normal. She appeared to relax. Chase was glad. He had a notion that she had been apprehensive, and he was relieved that he had instilled confidence in her.

Well, she wasn't beautiful exactly, but she certainly had a beautiful voice. Chase could not remember that he had ever heard a voice just like that before. It was so sort of satiny. It was in a lower key than he would have expected in a girl so slight as she was, not a husky voice exactly, but—oh, a nice voice, pleasant, dang it!

"Were you going to town?" she asked.

Chase had not been going to the nearest town. He had been going to cut away from it presently. He would save several miles in that way—but now he was going to town. He was going to town for the very good reason that she unquestionably wanted an errand done there.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered. "Headed right for town. Be there before long. Was just going to shake up this lazy hoss of mine."

She stood looking at him intently for a minute. He saw then that she had been fighting for serenity. She was troubled; she had something on her mind; but she had been keeping it down. She was being game. Chase's heart instantly warmed to her increasingly. That was what he liked, gameness in men or women. It was what counted in this here world.

"If there is anything a-tall you want in town, ma'am," he said, "all you got to do is to mention it, and it is the same as got for you."

"I can trust you, can't I?" she asked.

"Times," he said honestly, "mebbe I ain't been none too trustworthy, but, ma'am, *you* can trust me."

Because of his emphasis on the pronoun, a fine rose color came up into her cheeks. By gosh, she was more'n pretty now. She was—uh—just lovely.

"I'll tell you," she said swiftly. "My father has been here for two months. We came here intending to make a home. We have taken up the land from the government. At first father worked all right. He seemed to be int'rested. He started a well and I'm sure it is half dug. If he goes as much farther he will strike water, I'm sure. Then he was going to build a house. You know, just a shack, a place for us to eat and sleep and keep warm in winter. It wouldn't have been much of a house, but I could have made a home out of it."

Yes, Chase agreed as she paused, she could make a home out of it. She was that kind of girl. Give her just a start and she would make a home out of almost anything.

"A month ago," the girl went on swiftly, "father went to town. We had some money when we came here, quite a little, enough to get us well started. When he came back from town, he didn't have so much. And he—he—"

"Had been drinkin' some licker," Chase supplied.

"Yes," she nodded, "and he started for town day before yesterday, and he hasn't got back. He promised me faithfully he would buy the lumber for the house and arrange to have it freighted out here."

"I see, ma'am," said Chase cheerfully. "Well, it won't be a bit of bother for me to look up your father when I get to town. I will see—uh—if I can persuade him to order that lumber and arrange for it bein' brought out here and come home himself. Anything else, ma'am?"

"Oh," she cried, "if you can only do that."

"Why, that ain't nothin'," Chase said.

LOOKING straight down at her, he suddenly smiled. The men at the ranch would have been amazed at that smile. It was quite unlike Bob Chase's usual smile. It did not seem so thin, and that hard quality was not in it. The girl smiled back swiftly, and now her face was almost radiant. Those were confident smiles, the smiles of youth to youth when youth understands by quick perception instead of by wisdom.

"Good-by," said Chase. "You'll be hearin' from me, ma'am."

"Good-by," said she. "Thank you."

Then Chase laughed.

"You didn't tell me your father's name," he said.

She laughed, too. Huh, music! Bob Chase actually blushed under his tan—why he didn't just know.

"His name is Shannon," the girl said.

"Thank yuh, ma'am," said Chase. "I will find him."

He started his horse.

"My name is Thelma," she called after him.

"Why, yes, ma'am. Excuse me! I am Bob Chase."

Now he rode definitely on, never once looking back, He reckoned he knew what manners was.

"Cute little girl," he said.

Which was not poetic and expressed very little of the deep feeling that was running through him just them.

CHAPTER III

HE HAD to apologize to his horse before he reached town.

Chase left the horse at a stable there and went along the street. He had figured things out a little. The girl had said her father had money. Then he couldn't have spent all of it. If he had "gone broke," he would have headed for home. Town would be no place for a man in that condition. The "friends" he had picked up would remain "friends" only so long as his cash lasted. Chase hoped he would be in time to save some of that cash. So he headed for the hotel, a two-story frame building a little way down the street.

As Down Home had said, Chase didn't care much for liquor on his own account. Heretofore he had bought it for other people. He had found a certain enjoyment in seeing them get drunk while he remained sober. So when he entered the barroom, there were expectant looks and boisterous greetings from several men gathered there. To them Chase gave only a cold nod. He wondered briefly how he had ever found any sport in his past conduct.

He strode up to the bar and failed even to call for a soft drink. The bartender eyed him speculatively. This was a new Chase to the bartender. There was something hard and cold about the man. His smile was missing.

"Lookin' for a fella named Shannon," Chase said. "Seen him?"

"Lookin' for what fella?"

Chase instantly knew that the bartender was merely staving him off. If Shannon had come to town and liquored up once before and had been here for several days on this occasion, the bartender would remember him. His pretending that he did not know Shannon indicated to Chase that Shannon was somewhere undergoing a plucking process.

"Man named Shannon, I said," Chase, stated; and he leaned a little over the bar, his eyes staring straight into the bartender's.

"Oh, Shannon," said the bartender. "Big Irishman. Yeh, I remember him. He has been around here two-three days, but he ain't here now, as you can see."

"Where is he?"

The voice was still colder, still harder, and its owner leaned a little more. The bartender's face paled.

"You gunnin' for him, Chase?" he asked. "We don't want no trouble. Fact is—"

"Nemmine what I'm doin'," Chase said, in a voice that was now not much more than a whisper. "Tell me where he is. Come clean, fella. I'm on a long journey, and I ain't got no time to waste."

"Why, he's upstairs in a room."

Sleepin' off a jag?"

"Well, no, he ain't been sleepin', and he ain't been drinkin' so much."

"Game goin' on up there, huh?"

"Well, don't mix me up in it," the bartender requested. "The room is the second on your right from the head of the stairs."

Chase's eyes swept this room. Nobody to fear there. Bunch of loafers, waiting for somebody to buy them a drink, and this was not Chase's buying day. He turned, passed through a door at the end of the bar, and softly ascended the stairs. In a moment he stood outside the door the bartender had spoken of.

CHASE knew about poker games. He had played in a good many games, here and there, himself. He knew that the spirits of the players were determined by the amounts which were being played for. A game in which the stakes were small was likely to be a boisterous game. There would be a good deal of "kidding", especially as each pot was won and lost. In a game for bigger stakes, there would be a little talk. A game for very high stakes was likely to be played in a profound silence. The players wouldn't even announce the amounts of their bets. They would let their chips talk for them as they shoved them to the center of the table.

This, then, was a big game! There was absolutely no sound of talk beyond the closed door. He put his thumb on the latch of the door and pressed. He had had a notion that the door might be locked, but it was not. He pushed it open and entered the room. Five men were gathered around a table. They were so intent on their play that they did not look up. Chase walked to the table and stood looking down. His eyes ran swiftly over the men. He picked one who he thought must surely be Shannon. He was a burly man, forty pounds heavier than Chase himself. His eyes were red from lack of sleep, but they were bright from excitement, Shannon, an Irishman, probably loved excitement.

And yet this couldn't be Shannon, for this man was a winner in the game. He had a big stack of blue chips in front of him. In the stack were half a dozen times as many chips as any one else had in front of him. Chase had never heard of a sucker coming to town and failing to be trimmed.

He ran his eyes over the other men again, and in them he found his explanation. None of them was what passed for a professional gambler in that country. They were all men who played poker because they liked to play. With them Shannon would have an even break. Winning or losing would be a matter of luck. Lady Luck seemed to be friendly toward Shannon on this occasion.

Indeed she was! All the players had been in when Chase had first looked down at the table. Eventually three dropped out, leaving Shannon and another man in. These two bet back and forth three times, and Shannon finally raked in the pot. With a look of satisfaction on his face, he stacked up his chips. Chase went up to his elbow.

"You Shannon?" he asked.

Poor losers Chase had often seen. He now saw a poor winner.

Shannon was one of those men apparently who could not stand prosperity. His eyes glowed with pride as he looked up. Chase was sure he had not drunk much, but lack of sleep had permitted what he had drunk to go to his head. He gave Chase a tipsy leer.

"That's me, Shannon," he said. "Bes' li'l' poker player in this hull state. Wanna sit in, stranger?"

"No, I want you to sit out."

Chase's voice was low, but his words whipped into the silence of the room. The man who had prepared to deal stopped shuffling the cards. All four looked at Chase. Shannon stared at him.

"Sit out!" Shannon cried. "Quit when my luck is breakin' better'n it ever broke in my hull life before. Not me! I'm stickin' as long as there is a player left to go up against me."

"You're quitting now!" Chase turned to the dealer. "Don't deal him another hand," he ordered.

He saw that the dealer was about to resent that. The dealer looked tired enough to quit, but he apparently wasn't going to let any one break up the game in this fashion. But Chase had a figurative card to play. He knew that these men were on the square. Their feeling toward a woman would be the general feeling of the country, one of profound respect. If they had been professional gamblers, Chase did not know just what he would have done. He knew what he would do now.

"Men," he said softly, "I'm speaking for this man's daughter. She is waitin' for him in a tent out in the desert country. She is waitin' for him, preparin' to make a home for him and herself. He left her day before yesterday to come to town to order lumber to put up a little house for them. Instead of orderin' that lumber, he has been gamblin'. He has been takin' a chance on losin' all he had. He ain't got nothin' but a tent and a busted down wagon out there. That's good enough for him mebbe, but it ain't good enough for a young girl, is it, men? S'posin' she was your daughter or your sister or your swee—"

He had been running on smoothly till he came to that word "sweetheart." Why, doggone it, he had never used that word in his life before. It was no kind of a word for a man on his way to Nome to be using. He stopped, flushing, and he felt Shannon's eyes on him beneath their bushy brows. The dealer tossed the cards to the center of the table.

"I got all the poker I want for a while anyways," he said.

"Me, too," said the others, almost in chorus.

"Shannon has got enough money to build a couple shacks," the dealer went on. "He had a roll when he set in here, and I figger he has got three hundred dollars in front of him. Count your chips, Shannon."

CHASE saw that Shannon was torn between two desires. One was to take care of his chips and get the cash for them, and the other was to rise up in his might and smite this intruder. Well, three hundred dollars was a lot of money, and Shannon decided to cash in first. He counted his chips and received the cash for them. Then he came to his feet.

"Here," said Chase to himself, "is where I get the tar licked out of me."

For certainly this Shannon was a mighty man. He must weigh two hundred and a quarter and he towered something over six feet. His shoulders were broad and his arms were long. Chase did not relish being beaten, but he supposed if he had to take a beating he would have to take it.

However, he would see what he could do. His eyes swept Shannon's bulk. He made a discovery. A good deal of that bulk was fat. Shannon probably was a big eater. He doubtless ate without considering what the result would be. For instance there was his paunch. No man of sense would carry so much weight around his middle, Chase was sure. Chase's own waist spanned a good many inches less than his chest. Now, if a man were to sink his fist hard and fast into Shannon's stomach—. It was a pretty good thought Chase believed. And besides Shannon, instead of going into action, was talking. Good sign that, for himself, Chase was sure. A fighting man didn't talk.

"Sonny," Shannon said in a very soft voice, "how come you know anything about my daughter an' my tent an' my busted down wagon an' all that. Hoom?"

That "hoom" was only a gentle murmur, but Chase was not deceived by that. Undoubtedly this big Irishman was an old hand at rough-and-tumble fighting. Chase noted that his big hands were clenched and that there was fire in his eyes. Probably he was just baiting Chase a little.

Speaking quickly and in an ordinary tone, Chase told the big man of his encounter with Thelma.

"All kinda of matter-of-fact, wasn't it?" Shannon asked, then.

"Very!" Chase snapped.

"An' that's why you're colorin' up now and that's why you colored up a bit ago," Shannon insinuated.

The insinuation angered Chase as he could not recall his ever having been angered before. This big man had looked pretty gross. Now he was merely evil. The mental picture of the girl which Chase had been carrying became more vivid. He could see her in her appealing attitude. He could see her smile. He could hear her call her name after him when he had been leaving. And here was her own father insinuating that Chase had looked at her crossways. He wouldn't dream of such a thing. He was on his way to Nome!

"If you-all got anything definite in yo' mind, yo' can tell it straight," said Chase, reverting to one of his many tongues. "I am goin' to take yo' back home with me. And now I have done sayed all I'm a-goin' to say."

"It is nine years since I had a fight," said Shannon. "I put a man in the hospital that time. Busted his arm in two places. Generally men stand back from me when they take one look. You ain't got sense, bud. You are walkin' into a lion's den and don't know it. You are goin' to get chawed an' don't know that either." His voice dropped, and Chase saw him shift a little on his big feet. "Yeah, I busted that fella's arm in two places—like this!"

His right hand flashed out to seize Chase's left arm. It was a swift move for any man, big or little; but Chase, as Down Home had said, stepped fast when he did step. He moved now with a swiftness almost incredible, and Shannon's big fingers did not close on his arm. Chase's eyes had dropped to Shannon's paunch, and now his right fist, not a big fist but hard as iron, shot out. There were steel muscles along the arm which directed the blow. Chase had a sensation of driving his fist into a pillow. The fat bulged out on each side of the fist. Shannon's breath leaped out of his lungs. Before he could recover himself, Chase curved his left fist up and it caught Shannon on the jaw. The big man wavered on his feet, but he did not go down.

"Gosh, I got to hit him again," was Chase's thought.

He hit him again, on the jaw, and now Shannon began to sink to the floor. To prevent the crashing down of that immense body, Chase caught him and lowered him to the floor. He lay still for a minute amid a profound stillness in the room, and then he got to his knees. Chase bent to him.

"Get up and I will knock you clean through the winds," Chase declared.

Kneeling, Shannon looked up at him. Shannon was having difficulty getting his breath. He was taking it through lips dropped apart. Suddenly a look of intense surprise came to his face.

"By golly," he gasped, "my fightin' days are over, and I didn't know it. Me, knocked out by three punches when I have stood a hundred and kep' to my feet. What is it you want, son?"

"We'll go out and see about this buildin' material you was supposed to buy," Chase said. "What I don't know about buildin' material is a lot, but I will stick with you till you pay the man, whoever he is. Then

I will be on my way. I got to get on to Nome."

Their business took them a considerable time. Little remained of the afternoon when it was concluded.

"I'll get the dickens when I get home," Shannon lamented. "My girl has always been patient with me, but I reckon, since she enlisted a perfec' stranger to bring me up with a round turn, that her patience is about wore out. Now, Bud, if you would go home with me, it would make it a little easier for me. You could tell my girl she was goin' to have her shack for sure."

An appealing look, laughter, shining coils of hair on a shapely head, the calling of that first name—Thelma. Pretty name, that.

"Oh, doggone it," said Bob Chase, "I do' know why I should waste so much time on you. I've wasted too much already. I got to get started to—. Oh, well, come on!"

CHAPTER IV

CHASE'S late associates were waiting for the cook to call them to supper in that snarling, hateful way the cook had.

"I don't see why Chase don't write to me," said Tennessee Wiley, in his serious way. "Me an' him was very good friends. He's been gone a month and no letter from him."

"Why," said another man, "give him time. This here Nome is away up in—away up around—why, it is 'way up there. Mebbe it'd take six months to get a letter from there."

"Well—" Tennessee began, but he was interrupted by a laugh from the bunkhouse door.

They all looked in that direction. Down Home Harney stood there. He was shaking with chuckles.

"Didn't you fellas know the boss sent me to town today?" he asked.

"That ain't nothin' to shoot off no fireworks on account of," somebody said.

"Ain't it?" Down Home asked. "Well, you was talkin' about this here late Bob Chase. He—"

"Late?" asked the literal Tennesseean. "You don't mean he is dead?"

"Worse'n that, much worse'n that," Down Home said. "He is done gone, Tennessee.

"I was ridin' to town," said Down Home. "I come to a flat. On the flat somebody was completin' a new house. Quite a little house. I figure it must have four rooms, mebbe five includin' the kitchen. Well, it was quite a sight, so I said to myself I would have a closer look-see. I rode up to it. Two men was on the roof, nailin' on shingles—real wood shingles, I mean, not no tar paper or such. Know who one of them men was?"

"Not," said a puncher, "Bob Chase."

"One an' the same," Down Home stated. "Well, I come up there without makin' no noise. They was bangin' away at nails anyhow. They didn't hear me. When I reco'nized Bob Chase, I stood what you might call spellbound. He put his hand up to his mouth, took a nail, stuck it in a shingle, held it with his thumb and finger, and give it a whack. Leastways the whack was intended for the nail. It got Bob Chase's thumb or finger instead. Bob shakes his hand and some blood flirts off on them nice new shingles. He cusses most shameful. Hones' to Pete, it made my ears burn.

"He was in the midst of them awful words when a girl comes around the corner of the house. My, that is a tasty little house, an' she was a tasty little girl. Nice hair, nice eyes, nice mouth, nice nose, nice bloom in her cheeks, nice—"

"Yes, yes," he was interrupted, "but what did she say or do?"

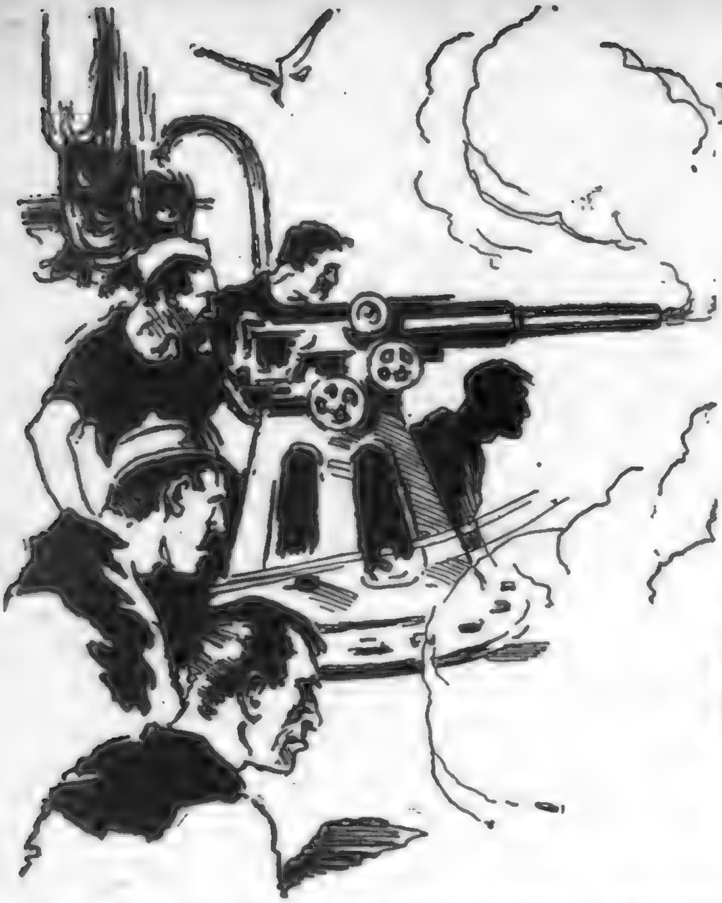
"Didn't say nothin'. Didn't do nothin'. Just stood there lookin' up at Bob Chase. He seemed to feel her look, for he turned and, say, he was awful meek when he seen her."

"Well, what'd she do then?"

"Nothin'. On'y smiled up at Bob awful sweet."

"And," Tennessee Wiley broke in, "what did Bob do?"

"Smiled back, very sweet, o' course, yuh damn' fool," said Down Home Harney.



A Complete
Novelette of War
at Sea

On the

ONLY one who knew no better would have classified the old *Grampo* as a ship. She was so low in the social abyss of sea tramps that the skipper of a condemned old canal-boat would have spat in disgust at her. The commanding officer of a man-of-war would have lifted his proud nose in haughty contempt at sight of her and pronounced her a disgrace to the sea she trod.

She was old, dirty and ducklike. Her plates were rusted almost through, her boilers leaked, her machinery clattered, her two funnels were so loose that they jerked and snapped at the guys, her bridge trembled and so did her two sawed-off masts. She was a thing of rattles and squeaks and groans, and heaven knows what held her together. One of her propeller-blades had been broken off. Her steering engine was a clogged rust heap; she had to be steered from aft by hand—which was a job that took the combined brawn and invective of four husky men.

East was the old *Grampo's* course, that cold, dark-gray morning, she being bound for France with a cargo of oats for the allied army horses; but you never would have suspected it, that is, that her course was east, had you been going by her compasses. One moment she was headed for Africa; the next, for the North Pole. Completely enveloped in fog, cold, sticky stuff, that fog, that floated through her shrouds and rigging in slimy wisps and woolpacks, she waddled along like a leaky washtub, sloughing this way and that, rolling, pitching, cork-screwing over and under and around the foamy whitecaps and curlers, with each plunge burying her blunt nose deep in the boil and swirl, and with each scend tossing up spumous white columns that swept back over her decks in hissing, swishing downpours. Both her forward and after well-decks were awash with a foot of sloshing, roaring water, while from her three raised decks, the short forecastle, the long, towering bridge deck and the diminutive poop, she shed cascades down over her camouflaged sides.

Slovenly, dirty, sloppy, unkempt and ragged were the men that peopled her heaving decks. They acted as might a gang of dock-rats, hobo landlubbers that had been bundled aboard drunk, shanghaied, slouching about with sickly and sorry looks on their dirty faces, cigarets hanging from their mouths, tobacco-juice drooling from their bearded chins, staggering drunkenly with each lurch of the ship. A couple were

MYSTERY SHIP

By Charles Victor Fischer

seasick to the point of holding violent and convulsive communion with Old Man Neptune, and, as final proof of their abandoned natures, they do so over the *weather side*—one of the dirtiest and nastiest things a sailor can do.

And their captain, "Carbolic" Wiltz, was no better than the worst one of them. He was tall, slim as an eel, and had a long nose that was hooked like an eagle's, high, sharp cheek-bones and small burning eyes that normally were gray but that glittered greenish under stress of provocation. He was under stress that morning. He had on a huge sombrero hat of peanut straw and a long glistening rubber coat. He sat perched on the rail of the weather bridge-wing, like a rooster on a fence, his shrewd little eyes glittering down over his long hooked nose upon those of his sorry looking crew waddling about in the rushing water on the forward well-deck.

Carbolic was not satisfied with his crew's comportment. Strange though it may seem, they were not slovenly and sloppy enough to suit him.

"You! Walker!" he bawled down to one seaman who was in the act of expectorating over the lee side—the proper side.

The seaman looked up, started to say "Sir?" but only hissed the *s* of it, checked himself, then squared away and growled:

"Wha'd'yuh want?"

Carbolic only continued to glare down at him, while the seaman, after a thoughtful moment, snapped to wisdom.

"Oh, ye-ah. I got yuh," he responded, grinning, and then went staggering across the deck to the weather side, and there deliberately spat into the wind—something only the lowest and filthiest of the sea's riffraff do.

"That's better," Carbolic growled and grinned his approbation. His little eyes then went dancing from head to head on the deck below, finally coming to rest on a group of four, idling up forward in the lee of the forecastle.

"Forward, there!" Carbolic's voice rose to a high, falsetto squeak. "Knock off that Bible class! Count heads! You fellows know the order!"

Of course they knew the order. It was printed in large letters and pasted all over the ship. Every one of them had read it a score of times. But that order was really a multiplicity of orders. Education takes time. These camouflaged bluejackets had left the big scout cruiser, *Rolling Lou,* one of Uncle Sam's big new pets, and come aboard this monstrosity only three days before. Carbolic's string of orders read:

> Do not idle in groups about the upper decks, as men-of-war's men do. Above decks, move singly, and keep moving; always have somewhere to go, something to do. When addressing officers, *do not salute*, and omit use of the word "Sir." Approach an officer in a slouchy, swaggering manner, smoking pipe or cigaret, with hands in pockets, and address him in a growling, disrespectful tone of voice.
>
> Do not shave. Do not wash. Do not scrub clothes.
>
> Spit on deck, or over weather side.
>
> There must be at least one man seasick at all times between sunrise and sunset. Use weather rail.
>
> There must be not more than twenty-four men on deck at one time, besides those on watch, twelve men forward and twelve aft. The rest must remain below out of sight.
>
> Those on deck must constantly hold themselves in readiness to act the parts of so many lunatics, in the event of the sighting of a submarine. Upon sighting a submarine, all hands must go scrambling about in wild, screaming confusion.
>
> G. D. L. P. Wiltz,
> Comdr. U. S. Navy.

THE *Grampo* was one of those martyrs known as "mystery ships." American gobs facetiously dubbed them "submarine provokers." Her duty was to go out and get herself torpedoed and sunk—by no means an enviable duty. But superimposed upon that was another duty: She must sink the submarine that torpedoed her.

On the face of it the undertaking was a harebrained one. Some of the ships torpedoed sank so quickly that their crews were unable to man and lower the boats. Moreover, by now U-boat commanders were grown wary, many of them having run into the armed-merchant-ship snag, and were no longer approaching immediately after firing their torpedoes. Herr Fritz fired his device of destruction, and then just lay there, far off a ways, showing only his periscope, in which he watched his victim till assured she was harmless. Not till he was satisfied that the stricken ship's entire crew had abandoned her would Herr Fritz bring his U-boat to the surface and come snooping in for a look. And to catch Fritz napping, to greet him, in the moment when he came snooping in for that look, with a blaze of fire and white-hot steel, some long head in the British Admiralty had conceived the idea of the mystery ship.

Such was the old *Grampo*. She wasn't half the fool she looked. Fritz would find her a buoyant proposition; stuffed in her holds were several thousand sacks filled, not with oats for the horses in France, as had been bruited about, but with ground cork such as grapes are packed in. She would sink, but not in a hurry. And she was loaded for bear. You might have studied the black and gray plates in her sides from fifty yards away with a pair of binoculars till doomsday, and you'd never have suspected that two large sections of those plates, one on the port and one on the starboard sides, opened outboard, folded downward on hinges with the pulling of a rope. Behind those collapsible sections lurked Fritz's reception committee—two long grim monsters of death. She carried a six-inch gun on each side.

She had put out from Norfolk, Virginia, four days before, with a skeleton crew of civilians and her cargo of "oats." Out at sea she was joined by the big scout cruiser *Rolling Lou*. Some careless radio communication passed between the two ships—enough to let the world at large know that the *Lou* would convoy the *Grampo* across. That night the two ships steamed eastward in company. Once, shortly after midnight, both stopped. The *Lou* lowered two whaleboats and transferred fifty of her bluejackets and three of her officers over to the *Grampo*. The handful of civilians who had brought the *Grampo* out from Norfolk went over to the *Lou* in her returning boats.

Next morning the *Lou* had abruptly stopped, coming to in a smother of spray and foam, listing heavily over with a jammed rudder. For several minutes she lay to, steam spluttering and hissing from her exhaust valve. The *Grampo* labored on alone for a ways, till nearly out of sight. Then she stopped and waited, till finally "Bear" Blackstone, captain of the *Lou*, sent the following radio message to his executive officer, Carbolic:

> Steering-engine trouble compels me to put back to navy-yard immediately. Will report to Department. Another convoy will probably be detailed. Meanwhile, proceed on duty assigned and make the best of your way.

With that the *Lou* had put about and steamed slowly back, apparently for Hampton Roads, and the old *Grampo* had pounded onward, pointing her broad, blunt nose out over the wild and wallowing waste of submarine-infested sea to her doom—ay, homeward bound.

THE old *Grampo* was nearer to her doom that cold, foggy morning than her funny looking straw-hatted skipper and his lubberly crew realized. Her doom lurked along close off the *Grampo's* port beam, in the form of a gigantic steel bologna. The *Grampo's* lookouts couldn't see it; the thing slunk along submerged, out in the fog fringe, with only a few feet of its periscope showing. But every move on the *Grampo's* upper decks could be seen through the lenses in that periscope, by the black-bearded one of kultur in the tiny conning-tower below. Even as Carbolic was shouting down to his men to "Count heads!" Herr Bologna Sausage was debating whether that old tub of rust with her handful of hobos was worth a torpedo.

"Och!" he grunted to his executive officer. "A cargo of oats. A few shells would do as well. But in this weather perhaps we will do better to have it over with. I like not this steaming on the surface in this fog. No one blows his fog-whistle any more, and we are safer below. The firing of a few shells will take time, whereas with a torpedo—" He blew a puff of wind from his lips—"Pff." He continued, in low undertones, grunting the string of commands preparatory to firing. Once he broke off and stood chuckling into his periscope. He was watching the gestures and mouth movements that passed between Carbolic, perched up on the rail of the *Grampo's* bridge, and his men on the deck below.

Could Herr Kultur have heard what was being said over on the *Grampo*, he would have been a much wiser German naval officer.

An old, in fact nearly the oldest, blue-jacket in Uncle Sam's Navy, acted as spokesman for the group Carbolic had addressed. Sharley Svanska was his name, but the American Navy had known him for twenty-eight years as "Sails"—he being a sailmaker's mate. Before enlisting in Uncle Sam's Navy, Sails claimed to have suffered in two others, the Swedish and the British Navies. Before all that he had been in the merchant square-rigger service. In all he had been on the high seas a half-century; but he did not look it, and he was still going strong. Tall, gaunt, gnarled, deep-chested, his shoulders broad though slightly warped with age, his snowy hairs frilling in the wind, old Sails presented a striking picture, a picture of physical magnificence that defied age, as he stepped out clear of the group and, with head held high, in obedience to Carbolic's command, counted heads. Then facing aft, in a bull-throated voice that belied his white hairs, Sails bellowed up to Carbolic:

"Dere iss yust an even dossen on das deck!"

Carbolic's little eyes darted in zigzag flashes from head to head.

"I count thirteen!" he shouted. "You forgot to count yourself, Svanska! For that, you'll be the man to go below!"

Sails drew himself up with much of Swedish dignity. He reddened, and his blue eyes blazed with hurt pride. It was apparent that he considered this a glaring affront. He did. Sails certainly thought that his twenty-eight years of sea service in Uncle Sam's Navy entitled him to some considerations of seniority, and that Carbolic ought to pick on some younger head. He stood there like an old peacock for a moment, head back, nostrils quivering, distended, glaring his outrage up at the funny looking skipper. Then stiffly, sedately, after the manner of a full-blooded lord, without taking his glaring eyes off Carbolic, he strutted inboard toward a hatchway leading below.

The green went out of Carbolic's eyes. He was thrilled. In Carbolic's opinion, it was superb acting. Sails couldn't have more perfectly acted the part of one showing disrespect for his commanding officer had he actually felt disrespect for him. Which was in minute accord with Carbolic's printed order. Carbolic was about to shout, "Well done, Svanska!"

Then old Sails committed a crime. With one enormous foot lifted above the hatch coaming, about to descend to the next deck, at the full power of his lusty lungs he roared up to Carbolic:

"Aye, aye, sur!"

Carbolic's face had that surprised look of one who has just sat on a tack. His skin turned to a bluish white, and his little eyes glittered green again. The old *Grampo* plunged her nose deep down in the boil, tossing skyward a spume of hissing effervescence that swept aft and well-nigh drowned him. And that didn't help the case of old Sails a bit. Carbolic got down off the rail.

"Svanska!" he shrilled, "come up here!"

Sails strutted aft. But half-way back to the bridge-deck ladder reason displaced pride and he commenced to realize that he had violated one of Carbolic's posted orders. This took the cocky strut out of his stride, and the blaze out of his eyes. He mounted the bridge deck, then the bridge, and was wearing a slight, sheepish grin when he slouched out to Carbolic.

"Damn it all, Svanska," Carbolic rasped, "what do you mean by braying 'Aye aye, sir' at the top of your lungs!"

Still grinning, Sails answered: "Das once Ay forget, ss—" He checked himself in the act of forgetting again.

"Any jackass can do that," snapped Carbolic. "It's just that—straight jackass boneheadedness! And from *you!* I might overlook it from one of the kids we've got aboard. But you! You ought to know better! Damn it, you do know better! Don't tell me you don't!"

"Ay haf forget myself."

"Don't tell me that again." And then Carbolic's little eyes, dancing up and down over Sails' tattered rags, commenced to blink rapidly, as if the bubble of a brand new idea had burst in his brain. One had. Carbolic was meditating on that "superb acting." He was wondering if a man could do that—act so perfectly, in carrying out an order, and then abruptly explode it all by directly and glaringly disobeying that order.

"You forgot, eh?" Carbolic's little eyes had now grown large, and glowed with the light of revelation. "O-ho!" he pronounced. Then he thrust his glistening hooked nose up close to Sails' face—and when Carbolic Wiltz grinned in a man's face that man had better make the best of his way to leeward!

Sails gulped and blinked, the vision of himself lying down in that foul, stuffy dungeon, the *Grampo's* brig, with the rats and roaches and with no more chance than the rats and roaches if the ship stopped a German torpedo, flooding his consciousness. Carbolic threw back his head and cackled wildly.

"I say, Svanska," he chortled, "that was fine acting!—that peacock strut—that go-to-hell attitude of yours down there! Damn it, it was well done, Svanska, well done. So well done that I intended calling you in the cabin later and commending you. More—I actually had in mind recommending you to the commanding officer of the *Lou* for promotion! I—poo-ey!" he broke off, as another gust of spray swept over. This one took Carbolic's big straw hat off; it went soaring away over the starboard side into the fog. And neither did that help Sails' case any. Carbolic put his nose over the forward rail.

"Send Slattery up here!" he shouted below—"Slattery!"

Slattery was a chief boatswain's mate. On the *Grampo* he was temporarily acting as chief master-at-arms—chief of ship's police. What Carbolic said to him was short and sweet.

"Put Svanska in the brig. Three days solitary confinement on bread and water." Carbolic shouted this loud enough for those on deck below to hear. He wanted to impress it on them that he meant business. "That's for direct disobedience of orders," he added, to Svanska.

"Das iss an inyustice, sur!" Sails fumed up. "You haf pronounce sentence before I haf state my case!"

"That'll do!" Carbolic cut him off. To Slattery he repeated: "Three days' bread and water."

"Come on, Sails," grunted Slattery, a short, heavy-set old-timer, taking Sails by the arm.

"Sur—" Again Sails stretched to the full of his towering six feet of Swedish dignity, looking Carbolic full in the eyes. "If yustice holds empire on das packet, you will permission me to state my case. I wass in das Battle of Santiago wis Commodore Schley on Yuly das t'ird, eighteen hundred an' ninety-eight, by yimminy!"

"You've got nothing on me," Carbolic snapped back. "I was with Dewey at Manila. State your case! You've already done that! You've said you forgot yourself. Is that any excuse for disobeying an order—in a time of war? Do you realize that such a slip as you made down there, bellowing 'Aye, aye, sir,' might cost us a submarine?"

"In nineteen hundred an' fourteen," Sails chanted on, "I wass manning a machine-gun on top of a house in Vera Cruz, shooting greasers till hell wouldn't have it, by yimminy!"

"I know, I know. And for that reason you imagine you ought to be allowed to strut about decks like a peacock, neglecting duty, disobeying or—"

"I haf never neglect my juty, sur, in all das twenty-eight years I am blueyacket. I haf been drinking an' fighting an' gambling till hell wouldn't have it, but I haf never neglect my juty!"

Carbolic turned on Slattery. "Carry out your order," he said. "Lock him in the brig, and then report to me."

"Come on, Sails." This time Slattery helped his prisoner along, half pulling him inboard.

"Sur," Sails flung back a final attempt from the head of the bridge ladder, "das brig iss not fit for a rat to be in!"

But he might as well have pleaded with a dummy. Carbolic was now hanging over the end of the wing, looking down at the water surging and foaming against the ship's side. But he was taking no notice of the water at all. Carbolic was furtively watching his crew, noting how this, his sending Sails to the "rat-hole," affected them. He took full note of the steely glitters in the glances shot upward at him, and also of the scowls with which the men looked at one another as they growled in undertones; and Carbolic was hugely pleased.

Considering the delicate balance on which things hung in those days, there was more of method than meanness in this act of Carbolic's. Carbolic really wasn't such a mean cuss at heart. He was merely doing what he thought was best—for the great cause. His duty out there on the Atlantic was to sink a German submarine. If his men carried out orders to the letter, there was a royal chance for success of the scheme. If not, there was no telling. A submarine could steam in pretty close, and not be seen, in this fog. Carbolic had sent Sails to the brig for the moral effect this would have on his crew, to make them take his printed orders more seriously—not for the personal satisfaction of retaliating for that peacock strut and lift of the tail Sails had flaunted at him.

In fact, Carbolic told his two subordinate officers, Lieutenant Wumby and Ensign Filbur, that he intended keeping Sails down there only an hour or two. He told Slattery this, also, when the chief boatswain's mate reported back to the bridge after locking Sails up, adding:

"Meanwhile, in, say, fifteen minutes or so, sneak down there quietly and unlock the brig door. Do it without letting Svanska know. Just turn the key noiselessly, and then slip away."

CARBOLIC certainly knew what he was doing when he made the *Grampo's* brig his trump card. The thought of doing a stretch down in that five-by-seven dungeon was enough to sober a clown. It was a dank, foul, stuffy hole, deep down in the ship, with only one small barred porthole which admitted little light and no air in a seaway for the reason that it was down near the water-line, and, when the *Grampo* was doing her stuff, had to be kept closed. But the big bosom terror attached to that brig was the thought that if something should happen, something that might send the *Grampo* down among the dead and forgotten, a man in the brig wouldn't have a glimmer of a chance for his life, because that part of the ship lying above the brig was closed off, the hatchways leading directly upward all being closed and dogged to render the ship as nearly water-tight as possible, and there would be no way of getting to him in a hurry. To reach the brig one had to descend a hatchway back amidships, then come forward through a long passageway.

The first thing Sails learned about his five-by-seven coffin was that he was not the only inhabitant thereof. No sooner had Slattery locked the door on him than Sails heard the squeal of a rat. He heard it distinctly, above the roar and crunch of his head. The porthole was submerged in sea smother at the moment, rendering the tiny dungeon in darkness. Then that side of the ship rose, the sea fell away from the port, and in the dim light that streamed in Sails saw the pointed snout and cunning little eyes of his shipmate. Sails closed his mouth, for the thing was close enough to have jumped down his throat. It lay crouched in a tiny ball on top of a row of pipes, conduits for electric wires running fore and aft against the overhead bulkhead.

Sails couldn't have swatted the thing, even had he a club, because the row of pipes on which it lay were close up to the bulkhead. Mr. Rodent was safe and secure in his tiny niche, and by the way he blinked his little eyes and wiggled his whiskers down at Sails, Mr. Rodent knew that Sails couldn't touch him. Sails clapped his hands. The rat only continued to blink and sniff at him. Then the sea rose against the porthole, shutting off the light.

"I will go to hell," Sails declared. "Das iss a shtinking hole to put a yentleman sailor who hass been fighting dey guns of das navy for twenty-eight years till hell wouldn't have it!"

When again she reared up and shook the water off the port, Sails saw one electric light globe, in a socket under the piping a little forward of where the rat was. He turned it on and found it to be a good one. Then he made a startling discovery.

On the upper side of those pipes was much life and commotion. The small recess up there between the piping and the bulkhead was alive with rats. The instant light flooded the dungeon they set up a wild clamor of squeals and went scurrying to and fro in rough and tumble confusion along the piping. One weakling got knocked off and, emitting a blood-chilling squeal as it fell, thudded to the deck. Sails hefted one enormous shoe, took a swing at it, missed it. The ship must have been in cahoots with the devil for, at that moment, as Sails poised on one leg and with the other booted the air, she gave a wicked, jerky lurch—and down squatted Sails on deck, to the most weird, unearthly, ear-splitting chorus of squeals mortal ear ever heard.

He sat as he had fallen for some minutes, watching the fun on top of the pipes with eyes that saw no fun in it at all. It was tragedy to Sails. He perceived a job ahead of him. Ranging his eyes along the pipes to where they passed into the forward and after bulkheads, he saw large openings around them. His top shirt would stop up one of these, he reflected; his undershirt the other. Moreover, he would have to use his socks, also tear up his pants, for there were several other holes in the bulkheads down near the deck.

But first he must drive the squealing horde out, chase them forward and aft along the pipes through the openings. He would have to use a shoe as a weapon. He had nothing else. In his pockets he had a box of Copenhagen snuff, a reeking pipe and a harmonica.

Sails removed one shoe and went at them. Reenforced with a thick plate of iron, as the heel of that shoe was, it made a hefty weapon. Sails wore size twelve shoes. Pounding on the bottom of the pipes with it he quickly scared the snarling things forward and aft through the holes. But as fast as he chased them out through the upper holes they came back in through the lower ones—through the openings down along the deck. He had his feet as well as his hands full. They came right back in, swarming about him, squealing in wild abandoned confusion and delight.

He killed a few, but there was no end of them. That section of the old *Grampo* was as thickly populated with rats as Shanghai is with Chinese. And there were huge bull-headed old boys among them, big as squirrels, and with teeth sharp as squirrels' teeth, as Sails quickly came to know, for a couple of them nipped that bare foot of his.

There was only one thing to do, and that was fight like a fool; and that was one thing old Sails could do better than anything else, despite his sixty-some years. Once started he was an old blue streak of destruction. He tore into them like an escaped fury, with a fist, a shoe, a bare foot and a booted one. He fought them, to use his own way of expressing it, "till hell wouldn't have it." There was no standing up before Sharley Svanska when he was going like that. Those rodents quickly came to realize that it was better to be on the outside looking in. And they made the best of their way out.

In not many minutes Sharley Svanska was the sole occupant of that brig. He squatted on deck against the forward bulkhead, naked. It had taken every stitch of the rags he wore to block up the holes. A dozen rats lay in an outboard corner where he had kicked them in a heap. He intended throwing these out through the porthole as soon as the ship knocked off tossing so. On deck beside him lay his harmonica and pipe. The box of Copenhagen snuff he held in his hand. From it he took a large chew.

"Das iss a shtinking hole to be in," he growled between swallows of snuff-juice. "But I will be dey King of Sweden if I have ever hear of putting a man in das brig becauss he iss yentleman enough to say 'sur' to officer. If I have bane ashore and come back from a few weeks' drinking till hell wouldn't have it, and am foolish in my noodle, I would not say word."

The heat generated by the fight had left him. In fact Sails was cooling off more rapidly than was agreeable. For the air in this dungeon was cold and clammy. His teeth commenced to rattle. On top of this, of a sudden he felt an icy breath of air sweep down over him from overhead. A surge that was half fear shook him. He looked up expecting to see some deathlike monster hovering above him. Partly shading his eyes from the light, he now made the discovery that the brig was ventilated. An air-shaft terminated in the overhead bulkhead. He had not seen this hole before because it was up beyond the light. The hole was covered over with wire netting.

It was nothing, and yet it was everything. The shaft, he thought, must connect with one of the ventilators up on the well-deck, just abaft the break of the forecastle. Then perhaps he could shout up to some of his shipmates and have them tell Slattery to bring him down some clothes and blankets.

For several minutes he tried. But either the shaft was blocked up or no one happened to be standing near the ventilator above. He shouted till his throat clogged and pained, but heard no answering shout.

So he sat down on deck again, cold, blue and sick. To shorten the weary minutes he took up his harmonica and began playing the one melody he knew how to play, "Marsa's in de Cold, Cold Ground."

Soon tears, big ones, big as peas, commenced oozing out and forming at the ends of his blue eyes and rolling down his cheeks. Sails was sad, and the substance of his sadness was that this was a cruel and rotten world.

IT WAS not to be that Sails should languish for long alone. He was soon to have a brother in his misery—a shipmate named Ohm. But this was not be a friendly companionship. They were not friends, Ohm and Sails. Nor could it be termed a companionship of enmity; for they were not openly avowed enemies. Neither hated, any more than he loved, the other. Yet an antipathy existed between them. They were like unto the two like poles of two different magnets; they could be brought together only by the application of force. There was something in Sails that repelled Ohm; and vice versa.

This aversion between Sails and Ohm had sprung up at their first meeting. And it grew stronger each time they met. It was instinctive, on Ohm's part. What makes certain dogs dislike certain men is no man's knowledge; but always had Ohm lifted his proud quivering snout and turned a stiff tail on Sails. On Sails' part it was a matter of environment and education. Sails had misgivings terrible and awful concerning Ohm. There was evil, or the premonition of it, in Ohm's eyes.

Ohm was a little dachshund, who had been brought aboard the *Rolling Lou* by one of the radio operators, Jack Mallow, one cold gray Monday morning when the *Lou* lay anchored in the Hudson River. This pup—Ohm was less than a year old—Mallow averred to be a thoroughbred, Ohm having come from a litter birthed by a blue-blooded hound named Fannie who had been stolen from a gentleman in Brooklyn, and survived an early puppyhood of gutter life. Mallow had the story straight, having been on the New York police force, at the time of Fannie's abduction, and actively concerned in that affair.

What Sails had against Ohm was the condition of Ohm's eyes. A sailor from time far back, when more powerful backs and less powerful intellects peopled ships' decks, Sails was prone to project some of the dark-age superstitions of those early days into these later days of his life. One of these was the cock-eye phobia. Sails believed that the condition of cock-eyes was invested with horrors unguessable. Cock-eyes brought sorrow, misfortune, sickness, death, fire sizzling and everlasting.

Now Ohm was not cock-eyed in the ordinary way. He was not cross-eyed, but the opposite. Ohm was wall-eyed. He was so horribly wall-eyed that he was a fright to look at! He was so wall-eyed that he could see far to the left of his tail with his right eye; and vice versa. Otherwise, from a dog lover's viewpoint, he was a thing of beauty, a rare creation. He had a perfectly shaped head, a long, slender snout, big lop-ears, a long, sinuous body which, with his short and crooked bow-legs, gave him the look of a lizard.

Another thing Sails had against Ohm: Ohm always came along and bedeviled his melancholy moments. Sails couldn't understand this. That Ohm loathed him, Sails knew. Ordinarily Ohm wouldn't look at him, wouldn't allow Sails within his circle of visibility. But the moment Sails sat down and began to play "Marsa's in de Cold, Cold Ground" on his harmonica, along would waddle that long, lean lizard-like thing, squat back on his haunches before him, point his snout at the skies and yowl.

And such a yowl! It was chilling, freezing, and at the same time scalding. It penetrated, sawed through one's bones to the marrow, gave one queer stomach distresses, splitting headaches, goose skin, made the hair stand up and sent icy shivers up and down the spine.

There was no slipping it over on him. No matter to what remote part of the ship Sails went to enjoy his moment of sadness and song, Ohm always sought him out. It was uncanny, almost supernatural, the acuteness of that dog's sense of hearing when Sails began playing that old melody. He always heard it.

AND he heard it that cold, foggy morning, did Ohm; for he and his mangod, Mallow, stood up on the *Grampo's* well-deck near the ventilator that terminated that air-shaft down to the brig. And the instant he heard it Ohm pointed his nose upward and commenced wailing his lament to the fog.

Thus Ohm came under the wrath of Carbolic.

"Mallow," the funny-looking skipper bawled down from his perch on the bridge-wing, "what's the matter with that goofy looking egg of yours!"

The same question had Mallow guessing. He blinked down at the howling Ohm, then up at Carbolic, shrugged his well made shoulders and bawled back:

"How the hell do I know!"

Carbolic's teeth snapped together and his little eyes glinted green. But only for a moment. For Mallow's disrespectful manner of replying was in strict accord with the printed order.

"Find out!" he barked, grinning. "Anyhow, stop him. That might be music to some ears, but I've got another name for it."

Mallow stooped down and stroked Ohm's long head.

"What's the matter, old socks?" he said.

Ohm only continued to yowl.

"Knock it off!" Mallow commanded sharply.

Ohm obeyed—for about three seconds. And in that lull Mallow heard the dim, far-away chords of a harmonica. It took him a short moment to localize it. Straightening up, he stepped over to the ventilator and listened. Faint, but distinct, the sad melody of "Marsa's in de Cold, Cold Ground" floated up through the air-shaft. Mallow turned and shouted up to Carbolic:

"He hears Svanska playin' his mouth-organ down in the brig."

Then Ohm commenced to yowl again. Mallow stooped, picked him up and started aft with him. But Ohm was not to get off so lightly.

"Wait a minute, Mallow," barked Carbolic. Then he turned and shouted down over the after rail: "Oh, Slattery!"

Aft a ways on the bridge deck, just about to go below and carry out Carbolic's order to go down and silently unlock the brig door, Slattery held up a hand in token of acknowledgment.

"Take that goofy looking mutt of Mallow's," commanded Carbolic, "and put him down in the brig with Svanska!"

ALL hands on deck laughed at that. The thought of Ohm and Sails being constrained to occupy a five-by-seven dungeon together was tragic enough to be comical, Even Mallow laughed, as he handed his dog over to Slattery.

"I say!" Sails rose in his nakedness, the bulging blue of his eyes shot with red as they glared downward upon Ohm, whom Slattery had let fall to the brig deck. Then towering to the full of his six feet and one inch of Swedish pride, he turned his glare on Slattery and in a voice that rumbled with subdued rage added: "Iss das your idear of a yoke?"

Slattery took a wary step backward, lifting one heel to the threshold. With one hand he gripped the door knob; the other he held up as if to ward off a blow.

"Now, Sails," he began, then broke off: "It's Carbolic's orders."

With his harmonica Sails pointed down at Ohm.

"To put das foolish looking lisard in das rat-trap wis me?"

"Sure. He started yelpin'—"

Slattery cut short his explanation and stared blankly, stupidly. There was fright, too, in that stare. For in those old reddish blue eyes was what Slattery took to be a gleam of murderous intent. The thought flashed to him that Sails had gone mad. And the fact that Sails had taken off all his clothing, in this freezing hole, strengthened the impression. Slattery didn't look around to see where Sails' clothes were. He didn't take his eyes off Sails. He didn't dare to. Sharley Svanska's sixty-some years and white hairs notwithstanding, Jim Slattery wanted no part of him when he was red of eye. Jim Slattery wanted to be out. And he got out. With remarkable speed, for a man of his fatty bulk, Slattery jumped backward out into the passageway, slammed the door shut and turned the key.

"I say!" the old tar within bellowed. "What in dey hell iss dey matter wis you! I say! Yim Slattery! Do you t'ink iss a yoke to leave a man wisout a t'ing on him in das rat-trap! I say! Yim Slattery! You dirrty shtinking yackass! Unlock das door! I say! Yim Slattery!"

"Plumb nuts," Slattery grunted, listening outside the door. "Batty as a loon."

Sails pounded and kicked on the door and continued to roar. Which was tantamount to butting his head into a stone wall, in that it but served to render Slattery more positive in the notion that Sails was stark mad.

Slowly shaking his head, and muttering, "I knew that old boy's nut would crack one o' these days," Slattery walked aft along the narrow, dimly lighted passageway. He was mindful of Carbolic's order, to steal back and unlock the brig door. But he dared not carry out that order, now. If Sails had gone crazy—and he certainly looked so to Slattery—no telling what mischief he might cut up if he got loose. Slattery decided to first report to Carbolic.

The passageway led far aft, passing outboard of the fire and engine room sections, ending at a ladder which led up through a hatchway opening on the after well-deck. Slattery ascended this ladder, stepped out on the after well-deck and started to cross the deck toward the ladder leading up to the bridge deck. That was as far as he got. At that moment something happened. The old *Grampo's* after end gave a tremendous heave to starboard, while her forward end lurched to port. A terrific *boom* went up. Something, a flying spar, a stanchion, or mayhap a bucket, smote him on the side of the head and he pitched forward on his face.

The big something had happened. The undersea sneak had fired her bolt of doom. It streaked a white line through the water at right angles to the old *Grampo's* keel line, buried its nose in her port side back in the after well-deck section, exploding its charge and burrowing its way into the after hold. A few thousand sacks of ground cork were packed in this hold. This instantly took fire and flared up, lifting the hatch cover and flinging everything on it skyward.

It was not the best of shots, from the Hun point of view. Carbolic Wiltz and his handful of camouflaged bluejackets pronounced it *the best shot of the war*. Had the torpedo struck a little ahead of where it did, in the 'midship section, things wouldn't have gone so well. The men on the fires and in the engine room probably would have been scalded to death in steam and boiling water, for there wouldn't have been time to haul fires and prevent an explosion in the boiler. Also, had it struck amidships, Fritz's reception committee would have been disrupted, and the big trick would have failed.

A red and roaring moment followed. The old ship trembled and groaned. Bulkheads, deck-plates, beams were bent and twisted under the terrific lateral pressure of the burst. Her entire after section, abaft of the bridge-deck break, was like a volcano. Half of that cargo of cork was flaring up in red-tongued flames the height of the masts and showering skyward in sparks. But the whole hellish conflagration was confined there, to the after well-deck. The men below had time to haul the fires and cool the water in the boilers, thus preventing an explosion; while those on deck had time to recover from the shock and hence were able calmly to go ahead and play their little game.

SLATTERY awoke to the crackle and roar of flame. He opened his eyes to see fire, a gigantic wall of it. The sizzling heat of it scorched and blistered his face and hands. The steel deck under him was so hot that it burned through his clothing. Gas fumes filled his lungs, making him cough and choke. He rolled, but not far, fetching up with a crash against the bulkhead that formed the break of the bridge deck.

Dazed by the thud, knowing and yet unknowing, he lay there for some seconds, gasping with the intakes of hot, gas-charged air. His clothes were afire in places. He slapped at these as the fire burned through and scorched his skin. Slattery knew very little in those moments. He knew that the ship was afire, that he was in the thick of it, and that if he didn't get out of the thick of it, in a hurry, he would be roasted alive. He gave no thought to the ladder leading up to the bridge deck. With the smoke, flame, and the fumes that blinded him, he couldn't see that ladder.

If he had seen it he wouldn't have gone up it. He didn't know that the fire was confined abaft of the bridge deck. Slattery thought the whole ship ablaze, and he had one idea—get to the rail and jump overboard.

But to save himself Slattery could not find the rail. He could see nothing but smoke and fire. Like a man lost in a forest he stumbled about in a circle, falling, rising again and stumbling on, his eyes blinded by the dense smoke, gasping, choking with the hot, smothering fumes. At times he shrieked at the top of his bursting lungs; but his voice was barely audible to himself above the crackle and roar of fire.

Up in the radio house, which was at the after end of the bridge deck, Jack Mallow, the owner of Ohm, was pounding out the S. O. S. message. He had sent the *Grampo's* position, her latitude and longitude in degrees, minutes and seconds, as given to him by Carbolic, preceding this by the word "Torpedoed," and was commencing to send it the third time. A gust of wind wafted a swirl of flame and smoke through the open porthole in the after bulkhead, filling the small radio office with fumes. Mallow stopped sending, got up and stepped over to close the port. As he did so he heard Slattery's scream for help—for this porthole overlooked the after well-deck. Mallow slammed shut the port and then jumped over to the door.

The radio house was close to the wall of fire. A wave of withering heat smothered him as he emerged on the bridge deck. He turned his back to it, covering the back of his neck and ears with his hands. Then again he heard that scream, barely audible above the roaring din, but distinct enough to tell Mallow that a shipmate was down there in that fiery hell being roasted alive.

The next moment Mallow stood at the rail looking down, protecting his face from the heat with his hands. Below he saw Slattery stumbling blindly about.

It was a moment of stress for Jack Mallow. Two duties clamored for fulfillment. He had not finished sending the distress signal. He had sent it twice, but had not closed off to receive acknowledgment, and hence did not know if it had been heard by the *Rolling Lou's* operator. Seconds were precious. The flames were leaping up the mainmast in long red tongues, licking along the halyards, guys, shrouds and ratlines, among which was the radio antenna halyard, its hoisting rope. If that halyard burned through and parted, down would come the aerial wires, and there would be no further sending or receiving. On the other hand, if he returned to his desk and finished sending the string of dots and dashes, his shipmate below would be roasted alive.

FOR about three seconds Mallow hesitated. Then outboard he galloped to the ladder leading below, and down he slid to that smoky and white-hot hell. Holding his breath, crouching down low to escape the fumes, he scurried over to Slattery. The old chief boatswain's mate was down on his knees, wheezing and screeching and striving to rise. Gripping a handful of his clothing Mallow dragged him back over to the foot of the ladder. There he boosted Slattery up before him—no easy task, powerfully muscled, boned and thewed youngster though Mallow was.

When Mallow got him back in the radio office Slattery was a frightful sight. His face, neck and hands were black and blistered. Parts of his clothing were burned; he smoked and smoldered from a half-dozen places. His eyes were the wild, red and watery eyes of a frenzied madman. He was babbling as Mallow sat him down in the chair.

"Fires o' hell, fires o' hell!" he raved. "Sails is nuts, batty as a loon! No kiddin'! Took off all his clothes!"

Then for a moment he was silent, his rolling eyes now and then coming to rest on Mallow, who was busy slapping out the smoldering parts of his clothing. He apparently took Mallow for Carbolic.

"I didn't unlock the door, sir," he burst out again. "Sails is crazy! Thought I'd see you first, sir! Unlock the door an' he might cut loose an' kill somebody! For a fact he will, sir! He's nutty, sir, nutty as hell! Fires o' hell burnin'!"

Mallow turned to the deck and pressed down on the sending-key. The hot-wire ammeter still indicated radiation; the antenna was still up. Once more he sent "S. O. S." followed by the *Grampo's* call letters, then the word "Torpedoed." And that was as far as he got. The dial on the hot-wire ammeter ceased indicating; it pointed to zero. The set was no longer radiating because the halyard running up the mainmast had burned and parted. The antenna was down.

Looking out through the forward porthole Mallow saw his aerial wires twisted and tangled in a hopeless maze among the smoke-stacks, ventilators and boats on the topside.

"That cooks our radio," he muttered, then turned to Slattery.

"Jimmy." Mallow bent over and looked in his eyes. "Know me? This is Mallow."

Slattery stared straight ahead, with eyes unblinking.

"Old Sails, Slattery—Sails!" Mallow essayed to arouse his train of thought.

"Batty as a loon, sir, batty as a loon," Slattery responded feebly, still taking Mallow for Carbolic.

"And the dog, Jimmy—little Ohm. Did you lock him up?"

"Fires o' hell burnin' all around, sir. Batty as a loon," was all Mallow could get out of him.

THEN in came the brains of the ship. For this, the little radio cuddy, had been chosen as the most logical place to use as a conning-tower. The submarine commander would naturally be training his binoculars on the portholes in the chart-house forward; he would hardly suspect the little deck-house aft to hold any one. Voice-tubes—and push-button arrangements connected the radio office with the large section below in the bridge deck where were mounted Fritz's reception committee.

Carbolic was followed by two of his hobos, a chief quartermaster named Wilde, and a chief yeoman named Nelson whose regular billet was that of ship's writer of the *Rolling Lou*. Wilde took his station at the voice-tube leading down to the starboard gun, Nelson at the one to the port gun.

Carbolic showed his stuff that morning. That the funny looking skipper was frightened to his hair-ends, when he entered the radio office, was as patent as the nose on his hawkish face was prominent. He couldn't hide it. Fear oozed from his every pore. His face was a greenish white, his lips pale blue, his sunken little eyes green and glassy. There was a perceptible quake in his knees as he bent over and looked into Slattery's smoke-blackened and blistered face.

"Who's this—Slattery?"

Mallow explained, and as he did so he was aware that Carbolic was hearing him only in spots. The funny looking skipper's little eyes blinked with that far away attentiveness of enforced concentration, his head bobbing up and down in affirmation of what he wasn't hearing at all. He had to swallow his Adam's apple several times to keep it from jumping out of his mouth. It was plain to Jack Mallow, who watched him closely the while he talked, that Demon Fear was crowding Carbolic hard. But there was nothing cowardly in the effort Carbolic was making to rise and breast it.

"The—ah—S. O. S.," he faltered, throwing out his chest. "Did you get our position to the *Lou?*"

Mallow had already told him of that—how he had sent the message twice, then broken off to go down and pull Slattery out of the fire; and then how the antenna came down when he attempted to finish it. He repeated all this.

"Then you don't know if the *Lou* heard us," Carbolic commenced to show intelligence.

"No, sir. But they must have. I have good radiation."

Wilde and Nelson, at the forward porthole, were butting each other in the head, both trying to look through the port at the gang abandoning ship forward at the port life-boat.

"Hot dog!" Wilde ejaculated. "Quit it!"

"Aw, pull your head in," Nelson replied, pushing the other aside and thrusting his face in the port. "Man, they're sure doin' it up brown!"

Meanwhile Mallow was giving Carbolic an up and down eye-interrogation. Something in that look went to the roots of Carbolic and sent a surge of blood to his head. Carbolic Wiltz was no coward. At the core of him smoldered a flame of genuine bigness. It needed a little fanning, that was all. What brought it flaring up in that moment was the very same bugbear that had been smothering it—fear. But it was a different phase of fear. Up to then he had been obsessed with the fear of failure, lack of confidence in himself, the apprehension that he was about to add another fizzle to his long train of fizzles—which train of fizzles reached back through many years, back to his remote midshipman days. But what he read in young Mallow's eyes was *pity;* and pity was something Carbolic Wiltz feared above all else. And it was just that, the thought that one of his enlisted men felt sorry for him, that riled Carbolic's inners and roused him up and out of himself.

And then Carbolic commenced to show his stuff. He straightened up, the quake went out of his knees, his jaws snapped shut and his little eyes burned with a new light.

STEPPING over to where Nelson and Wilde were trying to butt each other away from the port, Carbolic put his hands between them and pried them apart. Then looking out through the porthole, Carbolic stood there grinning for a few moments, watching the preliminary to this farce being carried out.

This was going on forward at the port life-boat, where about thirty of the *Grampo's* hobos were gathered. Carbolic's grin broadened as he watched them; for indeed they were doing their stuff perfectly. They were abandoning ship to the "bloomin' queen's taste", with just such headless, maniacal disorder as might be expected from a crowd of forlorn and loony landlubbers, some screaming with full lung-power, some lifting their arms and with devout faces turned upward praying to the fog, some wildly waving their arms, kicking, swinging wild wallops at one another, a dozen of them all balled up in a crazy tangle of arms and legs and trying to pile over the boat's gunwale at once.

The first move in this game was to make Fritz think the entire *Grampo's* crew was abandoning ship. An old tramp of her rating would have carried a crew of twenty-five or thirty. About that number were crowding about the life-boat. The rest were remaining aboard to receive Fritz. Lieutenant Wumby was captaining these, the men below at the concealed guns; Ensign Filbur had charge of the force abandoning; while Carbolic, in the radio office, commanded the whole.

Shortly both guns reported "Ready" through the voice-tubes. Carbolic was now dancing from one porthole to another; but as yet no U-boat could be seen.

"Captain," Mallow spoke up, "how about my dog? He's down in the brig with Svanska."

Carbolic halted at the forward port for another look at the burlesque being staged at the boat.

"Didn't Slattery release them?"

"I don't think so."

They tried to rouse Slattery. But all they could get out of him was, "Batty as a loon, sir! Fires o' hell!" Mallow fished the bunch of keys out of his pocket.

"I'll go down to the brig and turn them loose, sir," he said.

Carbolic turned on him and snatched the keys out of his hand.

"Are you crazy?" he snarled. "*You'll* go down to the brig! Do you know your duty in this game?"

"Yes, sir, but my dog—"

"To hell with your dog! Is your sending-set in that boat?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Is it in O. K. order?"

"It tested all right early this morning."

"All right. Take Slattery forward and put him in that boat! Then pile yourself in!"

"My dog, sir—"

"Shut up! Carry out your orders!"

For a moment Carbolic stood there as straight as a ramrod. The funny looking skipper had the situation in hand now. Better, he had himself in hand. With that roaring column of flame only fifty feet away the little radio house was as hot as an oven; but Carbolic was as cool as an icicle. He stepped over to the after porthole and looked down at the well-deck. Down there, a little forward of the fire, was the hatchway opening down into that passageway leading forward to the brig. Carbolic noted there was a clear space of deck between that hatchway and the fire. That satisfied him for the moment. He turned again to Mallow.

"Get Slattery in that boat and in the hands of the chief pharmacist's mate. Then jump in yourself and look to your sending-set. Your duty is to shove off in that boat and be ready to make signals so that the *Lou* can take radio-compass bearings on us and locate us—not to go galloping over the ship rescuing dogs! Get!"

Mallow bent over and boosted Slattery to his shoulders. Nelson opened the door for them. Carbolic flung after him:

"Don't worry about your mutt! No ship of mine ever went down with any one locked in the brig!"

THE way that boatload of camouflaged bluejackets abandoned the old *Grampo* must have made thousands of bygone seamen turn over in their graves and groan.

First they took a long time clearing the boat of the antenna wires, which had fallen down across it; though this could have been done in a very few minutes. Then they went through all manner of motions and antics getting the boat swung outboard, as if the davits were frozen and refused to swing, the falls jammed. An argument followed, those on deck who were trying to push the boat outboard demanding those in the boat to get out and help swing her out. Which the fellows in the boat refused to do. One, a bull-necked and bulldog-faced roughneck named "Bull" Wilson, picked up an oar and brandished it aloft, threatening to crush the heads along the gunwale. To make things look a bit more realistic, Ensign Filbur, up in the stern sheets, drew his pistol, pointed it at Bull and demanding that he get out. Bull dropped the oar, then drew back a huge fist and made as if to swing a wallop at his superior officer. Ensign Filbur went him one better by firing —point blank in Bull's face—or so it must have appeared to the one looking in his periscope off in the fog fringe. Bull carried it to its finest point by tumbling over backward to the bottom of the boat.

"That lets me out, sir," he exulted up to his superior officer. "I'm dead now an' don't have to pull no oar."

"All right," the young officer snapped back. "See that you stay dead. To make it look good we may have to dump you in the water." He broke off to the men on deck. "All right, that's monkey-work enough. Shove 'er out and jump in!"

SHE swung out without any further buffoonery. When she hung clear of the side, and all were aboard, Ensign Filbur gave the command to lower away.

The way they lowered that boat to the water was much worse than ridiculous. The *Grampo* had drifted about till she lay stern on to the drive of wind and wave. This made launching the boat a difficult task, one calling for skilful seamanship. With its stern end pointed to the push of wind and sea, the boat's forward end should have been lowered to the water first; the stern end should have been held up clear of the water till the forward fall was unhooked. These sailors did just the opposite, with the result that she plunged her stern into the side of a wave, dipping up a half-ton of boiling water that rushed over the stern sheets lifting Ensign Filbur's feet skyward and all but washing the men at the after rail overboard.

"Let 'er go, let 'er go!" shouted the young officer, as he sat down. "Shove off! Out oars!"

And such a stroke as they pulled! All together—one after the other. They all caught crabs. Each one fouled the oar ahead of him, and wrangled and snarled with the man behind him for fouling his. But away she rode, now high on a crest, now deep in a hollow; for once clear of the ship, she was headed just right, with the push of wind and sea behind her. And how she rode!

"Oars!" Ensign Filbur shouted suddenly. For it suddenly broke on him that no further pulling was necessary—not in that direction. There was a heavy southerly current running, a resultant of wind and wave that, even with the men resting on their oars, carried the boat along and, owing to the much greater resistance the *Grampo's* clumsy bulk offered to this current, rapidly increased the distance between ship and boat. The young officer noted this, but not till his boat was fully two hundred yards from the burning ship. Which was just about in time. Had he let her ride another fifty yards, they would no longer have been able to see the *Grampo;* all they could see of her now was a great reddish-black smudge against the thick gray fog.

With a "Back water, starboard; give 'way, port!" and a powerful stroke of the steering oar, Ensign Filbur brought his boat about till she lay head on to the push of wind and sea. Then: "Give 'way together —easy!" And thus he held her up to it, with a slow, easy stroke.

"I hope Fritz didn't see that," muttered Ensign Filbur, realizing that in so ably bringing his boat about he might have messed things. "Anyhow, if he did, it's too late to yowl about it. Look around, men. Anybody see a stovepipe?"

They could see no periscope. The fog was too dense to see much of anything. The boat rose and fell, at times plunging her nose and hurling back a spray. It was cold, icy. The men's faces were blue and their teeth rattled; but they kept silent, slowly, erratically, pulling at the oars, each doing his utmost to maintain that awed expression of one facing the unknown.

UP IN the bow a chief pharmacist's mate had Slattery laid out on a tarpaulin and was attending to his burns. The chief boatswain's mate was now resting quietly. Near them sat Mallow, huddled over a large bundle wrapped in rubber. This bundle contained a small radio sending-set, a spark-coil apparatus comprising a storage battery, a coil and vibrator and a sending-key. Mallow had a portable antenna, a miniature affair of small wire wound on a large spool, which was to be hoisted, later, after the big trick had been put across, with the stepping of the thirty-foot mast which lay across the thwarts.

The object of this sending outfit was to help the *Rolling Lou* in locating her boats, by means of her radio-compass, or direction-finder—the latter a device which enables an operator receiving to determine the exact direction or bearing of a ship sending.

Had it been a clear day this would not have been necessary. Under the circumstances it was a wise provision. True, the *Lou* had the *Grampo's* position, her exact latitude and longitude at the moment she was torpedoed—for Carbolic Wiltz was an able navigator. Moreover, the *Lou* was only an hour's gallop from the *Grampo*, when the torpedo struck her. But even so, in so dense a fog, with a strong wind and a heavy running sea carrying the boats away, the chances of making a straight bee-line for those boats were small. The *Lou* could easily enough head for where they *had been;* but they would no longer be there when she arrived. The big scout cruiser's being equipped with a radio-compass, however, made it a different story. It remained only for Mallow in the boat to hoist his miniature antenna, hook in his spark-coil set and then sit down to his sending-key, while the *Lou's* operator tuned and adjusted his radio-compass which would give him the direct bee-line bearing of that boat from the *Lou*. Thus Bear Blackstone, captain of the *Lou*, had only to hold his ship on that course. He couldn't overshoot his object. He had those signals from the boat to check up on. As long as signals were being sent from that boat the *Lou* couldn't miss her.

But this of course was the last move of the game. It wouldn't do to step the mast, hoist the antenna and commence flashing out radio signals till after the U-boat had been disposed of. Sinking the U-boat was the next move in this game. And that U-boat was a long time showing herself.

Meanwhile the old *Grampo* was slowly settling by the stern. The column of flame grew lower, as the water rushed through that large hole stove in her side and smothered out the fire. She was bound homeward, for the bottom, and as it looked to the men in her boat, the moment of her final plunge was not many minutes away.

The dead man was first to see the U-boat's emerging conning-tower. Bull Wilson wasn't used to being dead. He was a man of action. Sitting up and looking out over the gunwale into the fog, Bull suddenly shouted:

"There's the ——" What he called her could not be printed.

There indeed she was, a hundred yards from the boat. Convinced that the *Grampo* was a ship abandoned, helpless, harmless, he of the head whose corners were packed with kultur was bringing his undersea craft to the surface. First her conning-tower broke to view, then her forecastle, then more and more of her long rounded topside aft of the conning-tower. Like a giant gray whale she came snooping in for a look at her handiwork. She veered a little in her course, making for the *Grampo's* boat. Her crew were pouring up from below out of the conning-tower and spreading out along her topside. They commenced shouting unintelligible noises across the water at the *Grampo's* gobs. When she was within fifty yards her captain, a short, heavy man with a black beard, shouted from the forecastle:

"Who is the captain of that rust-heap?"

Ensign Filbur shouted back that he was.

The kultured one appeared deeply thoughtful at this. He lifted his binoculars and brought them to bear on Ensign Filbur. Then lowering them he stroked his beard and began talking to a subordinate officer near him.

Mindful that he was rather young looking for a ship's captain, Ensign Filbur pointed to Slattery, lying forward in the boat, and shouted:

"Our captain was badly hurt during the explosion. I am the first officer."

That seemed to satisfy the bearded one on the submarine. He bobbed his square kultur-box up and down, and with a flash of his teeth returned:

"My compliments, young captain, on

your new command." Then pointing to the *Grampo:* "I am sorry for the bellies of those Ally army horses in France. They will have to go without their rations of oats for a while."

Ill suppressed chuckles rose from the gobs in the boat.

"Pipe down!" their young officer half whispered and half snarled. "You damn fools!" he added.

Blackbeard turned and grunted an order back to the conning-tower. The U-boat went ahead slowly, now nosing in toward the *Grampo.* With a grand sweep of his fat hand to the westward, Blackbeard flung back:

"Young captain, I wish you a pleasant voyage!"

"Same to you!" Ensign Filbur returned. Then his dark young face became very solemn. Lowering his voice he said to his men. "And by the grace of Almighty God, he's got one coming."

Which was so. Within that minute Carbolic Wiltz, up in the *Grampo's* radio cuddy, gave the command for which his men below at the starboard gun were waiting on their toes. Wilde shouted down through the voice-tube, "Let go and fire!" Below, the gun captain pulled a string, and a large square section of the ship's side fell out.

What Herr Fritz's feelings were in that moment, when, snooping in for a last look at the sinking old rust-tub, he suddenly saw that large slab of her side fall out and found himself looking into the muzzle of a six-inch gun, only Davy Jones knows—for simultaneous with the perception and the flood of realization came the deafening roar and the blinding flash. . . .

There was a tremendous upheaval of water; it rose in a towering column, so high that for a full minute following the bursting of the shattering shell a heavy downpour fell. When it had settled there remained no conning-tower of the U-boat to be seen. The *Grampo's* shell had struck and burst there, in the belly of her just below and abaft of the conning-tower. She had been all but cut in half. Her forward end filled instantly, weighting her down, so that her after end rose up in the air, higher and higher, like a monster sausage, till her vertical and horizontal rudders and propellers pointed straight up into the fog. And thus she plunged, straight down, to the home of dead men and dead ships, a little ahead of the ship she had murdered.

THERE was nothing monkeyish in the way the *Grampo's* gobs swung out and manned the second boat. They were gobs in a hurry, who had finished a big job. They wanted to be off.

One slight hitch occurred. The boat was manned and swung out clear of the ship's side, and Lieutenant Wumby, at the steering oar, was about to give command to lower away, when he noted that Carbolic had not embarked but tarried behind on deck.

It was no time for tarrying. Every man in that boat was fully and keenly mindful of the danger of a boat being sucked down by a sinking ship. The old *Grampo* was deep in the water aft. Her poop deck stood out like an island. She sloped down steeply. The fire was out, for the well-deck holds were filled, while the well-deck proper was awash. The water had risen and lapped about the coaming of the hatchway opening down into the forward passageway, and it was only a question of seconds when it would pour down and choke up the end of that one avenue of escape for the man and dog in the brig.

Lieutenant Wumby didn't know of the two prisoners in the brig. He *had* known, but he thought they had been released and got away in the first boat. Therefore he couldn't understand why Carbolic stood there at the bridge deck rail and shouted, "Lower away!" In the act of shipping the steering oar, Lieutenant Wumby paused and looked foolish.

"Lower away!" Carbolic repeated.

"But you, sir!"

"Carry out your order!" Carbolic roared. "Get your boat in the water and shove off clear of the ship!"

It was no part of Lieutenant Wumby's cosmic scheme to debate an order from his commanding officer. "Lower away!" he shouted. And as the boat descended down the ship's side, looking up he saw Carbolic's lean, pale face with its little glittering eyes, and above the creaking blocks heard:

"Get off clear of the ship, Wumby! I'm going down for the man in the brig! We'll take the small boat on the other side! Get clear!"

They saw no more of him. The boat struck the water. The men at the falls unhooked her.

"Shove off!" shouted the lieutenant. Then: "Out oars!"

She mounted to the crest of a roller, then went tobogganing to a watery valley, her nose buried in a boil of foam and smothering spray. Another one lifted her, and away she sailed, in the wink of an eye far out and away from the sinking ship.

Like his junior officer, Lieutenant Wumby came to a full realization of the powerful wind and wash only after his boat had run two hundred yards. Then in the same seamanlike manner he brought her about head-on.

THE two boats were now fifty yards apart, both about the same distance from the *Grampo*. By slowly pulling at the oars each boat maintained sufficient headway to breast the southerly push. Those in the first boat began shouting happy hails and congratulations across the water; but Lieutenant Wumby wet-blanketed these when he shouted back through his megaphone that the *Rolling Lou's* executive officer, Sharley Svanska and the lizard-like little Ohm were still on board the *Grampo*. There was silence again then, for that meant that the big game was not yet played out.

The mast was stepped in the first boat and the tiny radio antenna hoisted. Mallow hooked in his spark-coil set and commenced pounding out dot-and-dash signals for the *Rolling Lou's* operator to swing his compass on and take bearings. But this was now a secondary consideration. Their being picked up by the *Lou* was only a matter of a short wait and hence the least of their worries. The accuracy of the radio-compass could be relied upon, to the tiniest part of a degree—to a hair; and the *Lou* was only a short gallop away. The big idea was Carbolic, Sails and Ohm.

They kept a sharp lookout on the *Grampo*, but little of detail could be seen through the dense fog. At this distance there was no way of knowing if Carbolic had succeeded in his attempt to liberate the man and dog in the brig and got back up on deck. Lieutenant Wumby had kept his binoculars dry by carrying them under his coat; but even with these he could make out nothing on the fog-shrouded old tramp's decks. All that could be seen of her was a blur of black.

"Better put some more beef behind those oars, men," said the lieutenant. "We'll have to work back a ways. I can't see a thing of her.

"But wait, belay that," he broke off, putting the glasses beneath his coat. Then picking up his megaphone he leveled it toward the other boat and shouted:

"Filbur, stand by to heave us your line! I'm going to make sail and work back toward the ship with you in tow!" Carrying the antenna at her mast, stretched in a triangle from stern to truck to bow, the first boat was unable to hoist sail.

Lieutenant Wumby's crew boated oars, stepped their mast and then ran up their sail, a lug. It ballooned out, the lieutenant with two heavy strokes of the sweep-oar bringing her up two points in the wind, and away she scudded toward the other boat. As she crossed the other's bow a line was hove over. Deft hands caught it, grabbed a turn on a cleat, and with a slight jerk along came Number One.

The *Grampo* lay dead north, to the windward of the boats. Lieutenant Wumby headed his craft northwest, which was as close to the wind as that particular craft would sail. His idea, besides that of keeping the boats together, was to tack back and forth and thus work back to the *Grampo*. But he overshot, and on the very first tack. When he gave the command to bring her about on the other tack, that is, head northeast, he discovered that his boat had plunged into the fog beyond that circle of visibility in which was the *Grampo*. As he leaned back on the steering oar and brought his boat up to the wind, he looked back and saw no *Grampo*. He saw nothing but fog.

Not that this was cause for worry. Coming back on a northeasterly course would soon bring the doomed old ship in sight again.

It did. Soon the black smudge of her loomed out of the gray mist. She was much nearer now. The boats had described a triangle, the apex of which pointed west, bringing them back at approximately one-half the distance they had been from her before. And in that period of ten minutes or so, during which they were running to the westward, the old *Grampo* had settled much deeper in the water. In fact she was just about ready to take her final plunge. Her poop deck was submerged, and also both well-decks; only the forecastle and the high bridge deck remained above the surface. There was no list to her decks; she was settling slowly, on even keel, by the stern.

"They're gone," said Lieutenant Wumby in a low, solemn tone, as the boats crossed the old ship's bow at a distance of thirty fathoms. And turning, he shouted back, to the other boat: "I say, Filbur, they're gone!"

With that the lieutenant brought his boat up to the wind.

"Stand by to douse sail," he ordered, as they came about.

On this tack they came back close under the old tramp's bow, then lowered sail. Then both boats stood by under oars.

IT WAS a somber moment. All eyes strained on what small portions of the upper decks still showed. There was no sign of life on her. The tragedy lay before their eyes. Carbolic had gone down into that passageway leading forward to the brig, but had not emerged from it. While he was forward liberating Sails and Ohm, the water had risen on the after well-deck till it flooded over and poured down into the after end of the passageway through the hatchway, thus blocking off exit. The two men and the little dog were down there in the ship's bowels, deep below the waterline, drowning with the rats.

There was nothing the men in the boats could do. Remained only to lie off there and watch the old ship take her farewell plunge.

But the old *Grampo* didn't plunge. She just sank down slowly, like some tired and weary thing surrendering to the pleasurable lassitude of sleep, settling on even keel, the seas rolling over and flooding her upper decks, leaving exposed only her slowly diminishing stacks and masts.

The two boats rode the waves, the men resting on the oars white of face and silent, their eyes fixed on that foamy white area of water beneath which the old martyr had disappeared and was sinking to the sea's graveyard. Only the dirge of the rollers could be heard. Every tongue was dumb under the awful and appalling realization that this victory was without a thrill.

Poor old Carbolic. Come to think of it now, those gobs in the boats couldn't remember when he had been anything else but a pretty fine officer. He had been funny at times, but good-hearted. Carbolic, the "fizzler". It was dirty, rotten, the way some got all the breaks, while others always got it in the neck. Carbolic had broken his hoodoo at last, had accomplished the end of his ambition and aim by achieving something for his flag—only to have mocking, hideous Fate come along and snuff out the glory of it in the very moment of achievement by snuffing him out.

Poor old Sails, too, with his twenty-eight years of faithful service under the flag. He would be remembered by many thousands of bluejackets, for he had always been a straight-shooting shipmate. There wasn't a dirty trick on his record.

And as for little Ohm, he was worth more than the German kaiser's whole family.

AND yet it was funny, the death of those two men and the dog, for the reason that they were not dead at all.

When the two boats had made that run to the westward, Carbolic, Sails and Ohm had come out of that passageway and waded aft along the well-deck to where a small life-boat hung from its davits. The water on that deck was now up to their knees; hence they had only to clamber in, lower it a few feet, unhook and away. Each shipped a pair of oars—for rank and dignity had no place in such a critical moment. Carbolic bent his long, lean back and put his bone and muscle to the hickory with the same will as old Sails did. Away they went, pulling for the south, with the wind and the wash of the running sea helping, thinking the other boats lay in that direction. Thus it was that the two other boats had missed them. When Carbolic, Sails and Ohm, in the small boat, arrived at where the others should have been, the others were no longer there but far off to the westward in the fog. And when Carbolic and Sails saw no boats, they rowed all the harder, southward, the wash of the sea helping them along beautifully, till suddenly it broke on them that they had left the *Grampo* out of sight in the fog. They stopped rowing and looked at each other.

"I'll be damned," Carbolic growled. "Where did they go?"

"I do not know, sur," chattered the naked Sails, on the thwart behind him; "but I will say das iss a hell of a way to go yumping around like yumping-yacks in das fog!"

Carbolic grinned at Ohm, who sat back in the stern sheets, with all the dignity of a boat's coxswain, his sad wall-eyes rolling and goggling at the overhead fog.

"Ohm, where are they?" Carbolic put

the proposition to the little hound. "Can't you smell 'em out for us?"

Ohm wiggled the point of his long snout and drummed a faint tattoo with his tail.

"Let's yell," suggested Carbolic. "Hang it, Svanska, you've got good lungs, and, by George, I used to be able to screech like hell at a football game."

THEY cut loose—bawled, howled and screeched with all they had, kept it up five minutes, then stopped and listened. Had there been any response they wouldn't have heard it above the swish and lap and crunch of the sea. The waves broke against the tiny craft and under it and over it, lifting it, hurling it, carrying it onward to the southward. There wasn't a chance in a million of them being heard. By now the two boats were far to the windward of them. But they kept it up, again and again filling their lungs and turning loose blasts of yowls and screeches that made them hold their ears shut.

Carbolic discovered that he had not forgotten how to put two fingers in his mouth and whistle. As a boy he had been good enough at this to get himself branded a pest. He was still good at it, to his own surprise and to the torment of Sails and Ohm. No locomotive could have discharged more shrill, ear-splitting and nerve-shattering blasts than Carbolic blew into the fog. Even with his hands clapped tight over his ears, old Sails felt his backbone shrivel up with each blast; while little Ohm sniffled and whimpered as one in terrible pain. But it didn't help a bit; it brought no answering shout.

Till his lips were cracked and his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth Carbolic whistled. Then he did what little he could to add volume to Sails' hoots and howls. Together they kept it up till their vocal cords were so sore and swollen that the best either could deliver was a husky grunt. They sat there croaking like two frogs.

A little fresh water to drink would have eased their inflamed membranes and helped them to further effort; but there was no water in the boat.

"Damn it, Svanska, we're lost," Carbolic wheezed. "We're drifting south—"

"Till hell wouldn't have it," Sails finished for him.

"And not even a drink of water!"

Sails sat batting his eyes in reflection. "Dere iss one t'ing I am sorry for, sur," he said after a short silence. "I did not see das U-boat when she iss diving. I am down in das port side, when she hass go to hell."

"She went straight down, Svenska. Lifted 'er tail—" Carbolic pointed his fist straight upward by way of graphic illustration—"like that. Then, *blub*, and she was gone. There were men on her topside. She must have sucked 'em all down."

"Das must be a hell for a way to die for das Yermans."

"No worse than they're handing out to us every day, Svanska."

"Yes, sur. Das iss das." And Sails went on to suggest that they attempt to get back in the neighborhood of the other boats by rowing back against the wind and current, using the direction of these forces as a guide.

"Good Lord!" Carbolic croaked. "In this fog? Man, there are three hundred and sixty degrees on the compass-card! I'd as soon let 'er drift and take a chance on fetching up somewhere on the beach of Cuba!"

"Sur, we will both be very foolish in das noodles, wisout we have water to be drinking. I wass in das fix once before. I say, sur," the old Swede broke off, pointing at Ohm, "will you look at das foolish looking lisard?"

Ohm was the only one in the trio who appeared to be seeing anything funny in the situation. He sat back on his stringy hams in the stern sheets, with his long supple body wiggling and squirming a sort of hula-hula with the jiggling motion of the boat, his wall-eyes rolling as if in lascivious delight, his tongue lolling out in a silly giggle.

"Das iss a hell of a dream he iss having, sur—"

"Listen!" Carbolic barked out sharply.

Above the watery noises they heard a low, long-drawn-out sound. Both jerked up to their feet, straining their eyes toward the westward. Again it came, a low, sustained honk—the unmistakable blast of a ship's fog-whistle. But it was dim, far away. They heard it again and again. Cupping their hands behind their ears they localized the sound as coming from the northwest.

"It's the *Lou!*" Carbolic broke out hoarsely. "Damn it, man!" He made one more effort to shout, but a falsetto cackle that broke in a crackling grunt was his best.

Sails megaphoned his hands in the direction of the sound, but his throat and lungs, too, were so sore from his previous efforts that the husky bellow he emitted didn't carry far.

They looked at each other, the same thought glinting in both pairs of eyes. There came the *Lou*. It was her whistle, none other. She was making for those two other boats, as the crow flies. Just as the hunting hound scents the wild animal to its lair, with that radio nose of hers the big scout cruiser was sniffing those boats out of the fog. She had "sure fire" on locating those boats; she couldn't miss them—so long as Mallow's little spark-coil set held out.

But those boats were far out in the density, probably a mile, to the north of Carbolic, Sails and Ohm. They had no radio sending-set in their boat. They had nothing in their boat—not even a voice to shout with.

"Good Lord, man," Carbolic broke the silence, "they'll never look for us! They—"

"If only I haf a shew of Copenhagen snuff," lamented Sails, "I would be able to holler till hell wouldn't have it."

"Hell's bells! And they think we went down on the *Grampo*!"

The boat gave a lurch, causing the big naked Swede to put out one of his enormous feet. He swore fluently, in two languages, as that foot came down on something sharp. But the next instant he grinned, stooped over and picked up that something. It was his harmonica.

"I will go to hell," Sails declared, and sat down.

Carbolic was still standing, glaring out at the fog. Sails began pounding the small instrument against his left palm, knocking the water out of it, the while chuckling hoarsely:

"Sur, I have an idear in my foolish noodle."

With that the old Swede cast a mischievous and malignant eye toward Ohm in the stern sheets, and then began playing that old fireside melody, "Marsa's in de Cold, Cold Ground."

AND here may as well end the story of the mystery ship *Grampo*. When that little dog Ohm elected to bedevil the air with howls he could howl louder than any other dog in the world. And he howled that morning as he never had before.

One of the *Lou's* lookouts, high up in the fire-control top, the "basket", heard that howl and instantly recognized it. In a few minutes the major portion of the *Lou's* crew were hearing it, and were scrambling for points of vantage along the starboard rails, up the masts, and to the search-light platforms.

A real wild bear in his most terrible moments was an amiable creature compared to Bear Blackstone, the short, heavy-set and hoary old captain of the *Rolling Lou*, when Bear was red and roaring. And he was so that morning. He stood high up on the flying bridge, his rough-skinned, frowning visage a purplish red, his eyes blazing with stress of excitement, his gray hairs and mustache all ruffled and bristling in the wind. He was roaring like an infuriated lion under the prods of its keeper, dividing his roars among the men crowding the rails on the forecastle, the man at the wheel on the bridge below, and his marine orderly whom he kept doing a lively dance to and from the voice-tube connecting the bridge with the radio office.

In response to that howl of Ohm's, the *Lou* had swerved her towering bow several points to the southward.

"Somebody's off!" the Bear bawled. "This don't jibe! How are you heading now, helmsman?"

"One thirty-two, sir," answered the man at the wheel—"almost southeast."

"Somebody's off!" Bear repeated. "Either that radio operator or his compass is crazy! Orderly, tell the radio office I want the correct bearing of those boats! Silence, down there!" he broke off to the men on deck below. To the man at the fog-whistle cord he added: "Knock off that damn fish horn for a moment!"

Again came that howl out of the fog, almost dead ahead, a trifle to starboard, rapidly growing louder.

"Slow 'er down! Starboard a little—just a hair!" Bear shouted to the helmsman. "That's well! Steady!"

"Ou-oo-oo! Ou-oo-oo!" yowled Ohm, now from dead ahead.

"Stop the engine!" roared the old Bear. "Steady, the wheel! Below, there, watch forward! Man that starboard crane! Toot that fish horn again! Stand by for a kick astern!"

To the northward, Lieutenant Wumby and his men wondered why the *Lou* had so abruptly gone off on this tangent. Her fog-whistle had been growing steadily louder—

then suddenly had begun diminishing—then had ceased. And when again they heard it, it was far to the south.

Both boatloads shouted in chorus. But the ship far out in the fog gave no indication of having heard; she gave no short, staccato blasts of acknowledgment. There was only one course.

"Haul down your antenna, Filbur," Lieutenant Wumby shouted to the other boat. "Make sail!"

Away they went, both boats racing before the wind, southward. It was nip and tuck, with Ensign Filbur's boat slightly in the lead. For about eight minutes they tore along through the fog like two things possessed, the spray showering over them, the roar of the rollers drowning everything. Every man was on his feet and straining his eyes.

Then out of the dense gray wall loomed that towering, flaring bow, the lofty forecastle and the long, sloping after deck along the rails of which ran what looked like a hem of white but was really so many white faces and hats packed close together. There she lay, the queenly *Lou*, long, lean, grim looking, a thing of beautiful lines and speed and fighting efficiency, a triumph of modern genius and science, withal a triumph in the possession of her to the nation whose flag fluttered from her gaff.

She lay pointing a little to the east of north, with engines stopped, steam hissing from her exhaust valve.

A chorus of exultant shouts went up from the two boats, as they swerved in a wide circle and, coming up parallel on her lee, starboard, side, doused sail and ran alongside on momentum. But the roar broke, abruptly. The men in the boats stood looking up the big ship's side as if what they saw was an apparition.

Suspended in the air high above them, both clinging to the large hook on the end of the wire hoisting rope of the electric crane, were Carbolic and Sails. They had let their boat go adrift and were being hoisted aboard. Sails was holding to the hook with one hand; in his other arm he held little Ohm. Carbolic was hanging on with both hands, shouting to Bear Blackstone on the flying bridge:

"We got 'er, Captain! She got us, but we got her!"

IN changing to an all fiction magazine, EVERYBODY'S is featuring adventure stories. Already, although this is but the second issue of the new EVERYBODY'S, it offers you the work of some of the foremost writers who know and love the seas, the plains and the distant countries where men and women still enact the immemorial primitive dramas of mankind. Just consider this list of contributors already appearing or about to appear:

CAPTAIN DINGLE
and his sea stories

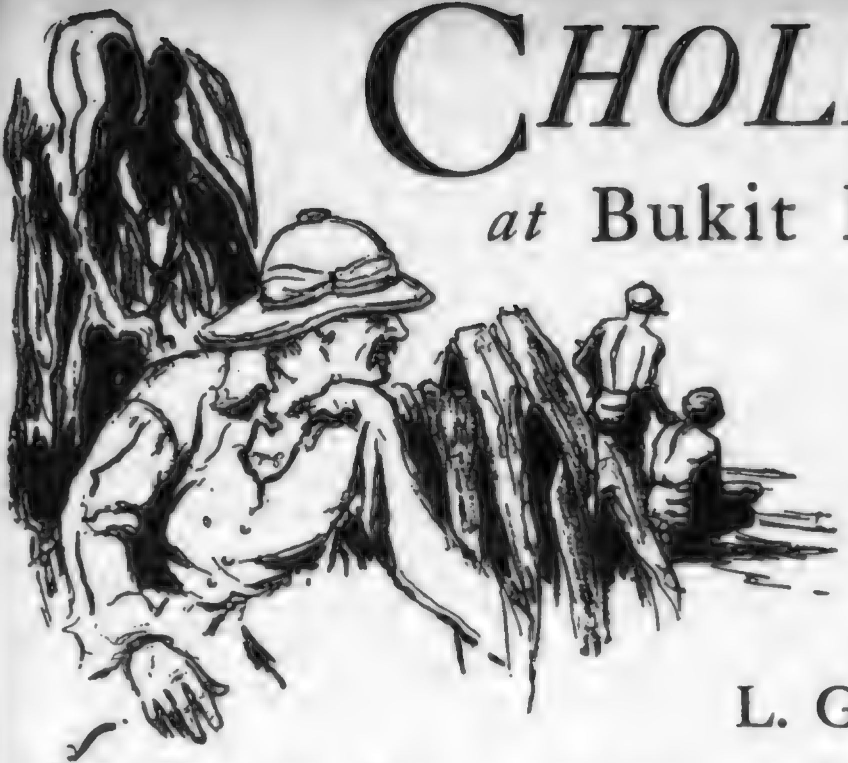
BEATRICE GRIMSHAW
and her tales of the South Seas

ARED WHITE
whose war stories have made a notable impression

CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS
whose tales of Western life combine rare humor with thrilling action

H. BEDFORD-JONES
whose characters reflect his own adventurous life East and West

AND, as we have said, EVERYBODY'S is only at the threshold of its new career. If you want excitement and adventure that will carry you far away from the gray routine of every day . . . then read EVERYBODY'S.



CHOLERA at Bukit Batu

by

L. G. Blochman

A Vivid Story of Eastern Intrigue

EVER since Jean Costaud had been manager of the estate, Bukit Batu Rubber, Ltd., had lost money. Bankrupt Malayan rubber plantations have been common enough in the last few years, but Costaud took it over when smoked crepe was worth a Straits dollar a pound, and the Esplanada and Orchard Road in Singapore were choked with expensive autos every evening about *gin pahit* time. A particular jinx seemed to have settled on Bukit Batu, which should have been making money in spite of the fact that it was a bit out of the way, up there on the border between Selangor and Pahang.

The actual deficit could make little difference to Sir Harvey Goff-Lennox. The profits from the Goff-Lennox tea and chinchona estates in southern India would more than wipe out the red ink of the rubber venture. But it was a matter of pride with the old man. His family had been plantation people in the East from the time of the first pepper gardens in Sumatra. A Goff-Lennox had helped Stamford Raffles establish British prestige in Malaya. One of the first tin dredges in the Kinta Valley had been a Goff-Lennox enterprise. He had taken some of the first coal out of the Labuan collieries. He was thinking of putting a gold dredge on the Pahang River if assays and concessions were favorable. Thus the balance sheet of Bukit Batu estate, with the rest of the peninsula raising rubber at a profit, was a sore point with Sir Harvey.

He had confidence in Costaud. A Belgian by birth, Costaud had lived a good part of his life in British colonies, and he was no longer a youngster. As a youth he had fought for the English in the Boer War and had been decorated—which went a long way with Sir Harvey. The old man got him from a rubber concern in the Belgian Congo, where he had a reputation for making his negro workers step lively. He should be having no trouble with the contract Tamil labor in the Malay States. He had been reporting numerous misfortunes to the London office, however. The first year a herd of wild elephants had playfully trampled down the young trees. Six months later the smoke-house burned down.

Now came a cable that Ford, Costaud's European assistant, had died of cholera.

Sir Harvey's florid face turned a shade redder as he read the message.

"Costaud advises abandoning Bukit Batu, does he?" he shouted at his secretary who had handed him the cable. "Well, we'll do nothing of the kind. There is no reason why a Goff-Lennox estate should admit failure. What Costaud needs is a man with a little financial acumen. Whom have we available?"

"There is Mr. Greaves, sir, but—"

"Just the man. Send him to Bukit Batu at once. Where is he?"

"He is in Madras, sir, waiting for a boat to come home. He has leave coming, sir. You said you wanted to speak to him about Pahang gold when he had finished his three years on the Travancore estates. His—"

"Pahang gold can wait. So can his leave. He has a keen brain, that boy. And he can figure. With Costaud handling the men, Greaves ought to put a little business sense into Bukit Batu Rubber. Cable him to take the first boat for Singapore or Penang, and to pick up copies of the Bukit Batu annual reports at the Registrar of Companies' office in Kuala Lumpur."

II

IT WAS early morning as the overnight train from Singapore roared under the white spires and minarets which are the station of the Federated Malay States Railway at Kuala Lumpur. A score of black, lank Tamil coolies ran alongside the first-class carriages as the train slowed to a stop. A pale young face appeared at the window of one compartment, pale with the anemia of tropical years without the respite of intervening months in a temperate climate. Dark hair and deep-set brown eyes had accentuated the pallor. The pale youth called two coolies in Tamil and gave directions for his baggage.

As he stepped to the platform he was approached by a large man whose khaki shorts exposed a pair of hairy knees, and whose planter's sun hat of double gray felt crowned an imperious, heavily fleshed physiognomy. His brown mustache was carefully curled and he carried a heavy Malacca stock. "Mr. Hugh Greaves?" he inquired. "I am Jean Costaud, manager of Bukit Batu estate. I am sorry you have come."

This strange greeting was spoken with a slight accent. The Belgian reminded Greaves of one of these adventurers one meets in the hotel bars and clubs of any port in the Orient, always just arriving from somewhere or just leaving for somewhere else, middle-aged but ageless looking, who regard the world as having been created for their express pleasure and profit.

"Why are you sorry?" asked Greaves.

"A rotten place, you will see for yourself. But eat first and attend to your baggage. I will see you later."

Greaves breakfasted and called at the Indo-Persian building which houses the Supreme Court of the Malay States to get the company reports.

Costaud met him afterward with a bullock cart.

"We will have to ride to the estate in this," he explained. "My Malay *saice* wrecked our flivver last week. Bintang Creek washed out the road near the plantation again. You see, already it is unpleasant for you."

"I didn't expect an arm-chair job," said Greaves.

The bullock cart jogged along over the red laterite road that leads east out of Kuala Lumpur. Soon the dull green of rubber-trees gave way to the variegated green of the jungle. The road faded to a mere track, cut through the underbrush, winding through creeper-hung plantains, wild almond and durio trees, threading among limestone hills, occasionally passing gray-white cliffs in which the abundant tropical rain had made weird and beautiful caves, half-hidden by broad plantain leaves. The monotonous green of the foliage sheltered the road from the burning mid-day sun but seemed to bear down on the heavy, oppressive atmosphere.

"One reason why Bukit Batu is no good," Costaud broke the silence. "It is too far from everywhere." The cart bumped and jolted over fallen boughs and ruts. "Look at the road. And water transportation is impossible. Bintang Creek is not navigable until it joins Pahang River. Even then it is too far to the east coast."

"Labor is cheap," reasoned Greaves. "Haven't you enough Tamils to keep this road in shape and build a few bridges?"

"Well—" Costaud gave his mustache a twist. "Scarcely. And that is another reason why Bukit Batu is no good. Tamil labor, Mr. Greaves—Pfaa! They say the Malay will not work, so they go to Madras to recruit these Indians. Of course, if the Malay wants to live like a savage in the jungle and eat nothing but bananas, instead of working like an honest man, that's his business. But these black loafers from over the way, they are even worse."

"I've found the Tamils good workers in the tea gardens."

"They are surly and impertinent," insisted the Belgian. "They do not always respect the authority of the white man. But I am teaching them. They are like cattle."

"After all, they are human," suggested the new planter.

"They are black," declared Costaud, "and they are swine. They worship these hump-backed oxen. They wanted me to give them one to put flowers on—to let him off work. He belongs to some god, they say. He belongs to the estate, I say."

"Why not let 'em have their sacred cow?"

"Nonsense. They take them to sleep in the coolie lines—make stables of the houses we build them, the filthy savages."

"Let them sleep in their temple, then."

"I allow no temple. The contract calls for living accommodations, food, transport, and medical attention. As for temples— Mr. Greaves, to the oriental there should be one god: the white man. All this cow rubbish— Watch your seat as we cross this ford. This is Bintang Creek."

AS THE cart lurched, rattled, and splashed into the water and rose dripping on the other side, Greaves felt a dull resentment against his new boss. From the time of the first clammy handclasp on the station platform at Kuala Lumpur, he had somehow felt vaguely that he was not going to get along with this Belgian. It is hard enough even for two friends to live in harmony with only each other's companionship. Greaves had learned to understand the Dravidian peoples and his antipathy toward Costaud was strengthened by this arrogant attitude toward his plantation hands, a state of mind doubtless acquired in Africa. Still, this might merely be his way of trying to impress his new assistant. Greaves would try to make the best of it.

"Here begins Bukit Batu." The even leafy spread of the rubber-trees and the symmetry of row upon row of straight trunks took the place of the rank disorder of jungle growth. The nodding bullocks followed a fan-shaped clearing which led up to a thickly wooded hill half a mile away.

"Why isn't this stretch planted?" asked Greaves.

"Bukit Batu in Malay means 'stone hill.' There it is." Costaud pointed ahead of him. "It has its roots all over the place. A vein of limestone runs along here. There is only about two feet of soil over it."

The clearing divided the estate in two. On one side, at the foot of the hill, were the coolie lines—two long, low, whitewashed wooden buildings which lodged the hundred Tamil laborers. On the other side, perched just off the bottom of the slope, were two small wooden cottages thatched with nipa palm leaves. One of these, Greaves judged, would be his. Costaud followed his glance.

"Yours is the one on the right," he said. "It was Ford's. Too bad, poor old Ford. Nice chap. Cholera took him quick. Hit him after dinner and by midnight he was dead. He turned black right away. Scared the natives yellow. They wouldn't come near the bungalow. I had to bury him myself before dawn—over there."

Costaud pointed to a wooden cross and a long mound about fifty yards to the right of the cottages. It was already green with tropical growth. In another six months it would be completely hidden by weeds and creepers. In a year it would be reclaimed by the jungle. The tropics not only kill, they obliterate.

Greaves stared at the mound. "Pretty shallow grave, isn't it?" he asked after a moment.

"Deep enough," was the reply. "Why?"

"You said there was only two feet of soil over this limestone stratum."

"Oh, in some places there is more. In some places there is as much as four feet." Costaud took Greaves by the arm. "Come, let me show you the bungalows. Here is your Chinese house boy. He was Ford's."

III

ALTHOUGH he spent half the night perusing the company reports he had picked up in the Malay States capital, Greaves was up at dawn. The night mist still hung over the country as he stepped out on the little veranda of his cottage. Beyond the even subdued green of the plantation, the misty jungle faded into a white plain from which great blocks of limestone seemed to have been pushed, their bald faces gleaming in the early sun in sharp contrast to the woolly patches of jungle with which they were capped.

Greaves walked about the estate to watch the coolies tap the trees. Black, lanky Tamils, clad only in a white loin-cloth, with their long black hair done up in a knot behind the head, were paring the bottom cut of lozenge-shaped scars in the bark. Little porcelain latex cups, taken from their wire loops at the top of the trunk, were hooked on the tiny spigots at the bottom angle of the lozenge. Drop by drop the thick milky latex oozed into the waiting receptacles.

Before ten o'clock, when the sun had seared over the scar and stopped the flow of sap, the coolies were about again, emptying the latex from the cups into buckets, and from the buckets into bullock-drawn tank carts. Women were taking part in the work of collecting, black women with gold ornaments in ears and nose, dressed in long *saris* of yellow, brown, or cold red which were drawn tightly over their breasts and flung over one shoulder, leaving the back bare.

Greaves tramped pretty well over the whole estate, talking to the coolies in Tamil, examining the trees, and watching the collection of latex. He followed the tank carts to the chemical shack, next to the smoke-house, where the latex is coagulated into rubber, and made notes on the whole routine.

He ate tiffin with Costaud in the Belgian's bungalow. A Chinese servant jumped to Costaud's orders like a slave under the lash. The two planters were eating purple mangosteens when Greaves asked: "Where did the elephants trample down the trees?"

"Down by Bintang Creek," was the reply, "but they have all been replanted, of course."

"Where the creek comes on the estate?"

"No, on the north side."

"But all the trees on the north side are bearing."

"Yes. Well, I believe in tapping them young. Waste of money to wait two years." And the Belgian went to stretch himself out for his daily siesta.

Doubts began to form in Greaves' mind. He doubted the elephant story; all the trees he had seen were mature. Now he began to doubt the honesty of the figures in the company report.

THE next day he personally collected the latex from a hundred trees in different parts of the estate, and carefully weighed it before throwing it into the coagulation vats. By subsequent computations, allowing for waste, he estimated that each tree should yield from three to four pounds of cured rubber a year. In Costaud's last report, the average yield per tree had been one pound. The loss of the smoke-house and the immaturity of some of the trees could not account for the difference. Either the trees were not being tapped or the produce was being stolen. Perhaps coolies were selling it in small lots to Chinese dealers in Kuala Lumpur who ask no questions and pay half the market price.

Greaves hailed Costaud near the smoke-house.

"Who looks after the curing," he asked, "coolies?"

"No coolie is allowed in there," said Costaud. "Foo Lam and I look after that. The Chinese are the only ones I trust around here."

Costaud entered the chemical shack. Greaves started toward the cottages, when he noticed cart tracks leading up the slope of the limestone hill. He followed them for fifty feet as they entered a thicket, beyond which the hill rose rather sharply. The tracks disappeared under an irregular arch which centuries of trickling water had carved in the limestone, nearly obscured by a curtain of creepers and luxuriant undergrowth. He parted the foliage and was able to enter without stooping. When his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he was surprised at the spacious dimensions of the cavern. The limestone walls were streaked with copper-blue, green, and brown fungi. Far above him was a moss-green dome, pierced by a speck of sunlight, through which water was seeping. He could see the drops fall through the half darkness, twinkling in the rays of diffused light from the entrance, and splashing upon the peak of a new stalagmite with which nature was studding the floor of the cave. Just beyond there seemed to be a mass of foliage on the floor. He advanced cautiously, then stopped abruptly. The growth marked the edge of a black void. With his foot he broke off a piece of stalagmite and tossed it into the gaping fissure. He heard it hit once, twice, then, a moment later, he thought he heard a faint splash but it was far down.

Greaves kneeled, took a grasp on the moist vines and peered over. The leaves were gummy in his hands. The whole mass of foliage on the near side of the pit was covered with some whitish substance. The faint odor of putrefaction seemed to arise from it. He plucked a leaf, arose, and walked from the cave.

Greaves stood blinking in the sunlight for a moment. He sniffed the leaf. The stench was gone, but one side of the leaf was coated with a layer of strangely familiar gum, which he could lift with his thumbnail. It was half-coagulated latex.

This, then, was where the profits of Bukit Batu went. Costaud invented cock-and-bull stories about production difficulties and went on dumping the rubber sap into a limestone cave all the while. But why was he deliberately trying to ruin Bukit Batu? Greaves wondered if Ford knew, but Ford was dead. Perhaps—

"Sahib?"

Greaves' musing was interrupted by an elderly Tamil, fatter than his fellows, with a white mustache that stood out on his black face like a splash of milk on an ebony table. By his shaven head and the double "sacred thread" he wore around his naked torso and over one shoulder, Greaves saw he was a Brahmin.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The month of Ashwina approaches," said the priest. "In the month of Ashwina comes the Dasahara, the festival of Bhawani, wife of our god Shiva. Sahib has lived in India. He speaks our language and knows our Hindu customs. He doubtless sees that here we have no place where we may worship Shiva and sacrifice to Bhawani."

Greaves was familiar with the worship of Shiva, the four-handed divinity who represents the reproductive power in nature. He knew the thousands of Shiva shrines throughout India, in which the god is typified by a bull, or a stone shaft called the *lingam*. Bhawani is the destroyer, and must frequently be propitiated by sacrifices.

An inspiration came to the young planter. The stalgamite-studded cave was a Shiva shrine made to order. To make a temple of it would stop the dumping of latex, at least temporarily. He pointed to the cave entrance.

"Here is your shrine, Brahmin," he said. "You will find it already full of *lingams*. Prepare it at once."

"But Coostoo Sahib?" The Tamil feared Costaud.

"I will arrange with him."

"Thank you, sahib, and Nandi?"

Nandi is the bull, the auspicious vehicle of the god Shiva.

"You may take one of the plantation animals. I will release him from work."

IV

GREAVES and Costaud were having tiffin. The Chinese boy had heaped their plates with rice and set before them the daily dish of curry, with the accompanying grated coconut, chilli, mango chutney, and "Bombay duck." After watching the Belgian eating busily with both spoon and fork for some minutes, Greaves spoke of the subject which had been bothering him most of the morning:

"Did you know there was a limestone cave on the estate?"

"Yes? Where? These Malayan hills are full of them." Costaud had stopped eating, a dozen grains of rice clinging to his mustache.

"In the *bukit batu*, between here and the coolie lines. I told the Tamil Brahmin he could make a temple in it."

The Belgian's narrow eyes, almost Mongolian in cast, became even narrower.

"Who is manager here?" he asked, laying down his fork. "You or me?"

"You objected to the coolies taking cows into the lines. I thought you would be glad to have them do their hocus-pocus in the cave, instead. It costs us nothing, and it will be more sanitary. Why, there is nothing we could use the cave for ourselves, is there?" asked Greaves pointedly.

"No, no. Nothing." Costaud began to eat again. After scraping his plate noisily, he said: "You must not make yourself accessible to an oriental, Mr. Greaves; it spoils them. You are a white man. These blacks are slaves. Yes, yes, I know. 'Contract labor' sounds nicer. Anglo-Saxon hypocrisy. Instead of buying them, we rent them. We give them a few cents a day so the female slaves can buy silver rings for their black toes and gold trinkets to stick in their noses.

"My boy, you have been reading books

written by old ladies of both sexes. You are full of brotherly love and similar mythology. When you have been about as long as I have, you will find that you have no brothers and that you must love yourself. You must put every one else below you."

Costaud got up, unstrapped his revolver holster and opened his belt—signals which always preceded his siesta.

TWO hours later there was a commotion behind the coolie lines. The old Brahmin came running to Greaves' cottage, his mouth bleeding.

"*Ai*, sahib," he wailed. "Coostoo Sahib was beating Nandi with his stick. When I asked him to stop he struck me on the face."

Greaves found Costaud in the chemical shack. "What's up?" he asked.

"Nothing," said the Belgian.

"You beat the Brahmin."

"Pfaa. I found one of our bullocks, with a string of sea-shells around his neck, eating the young leaves off the trees. Such gourmand ideas I immediately knocked out of his head."

"You risk starting a riot."

"Among worms?" Costaud laughed.

"If there is one thing that will stir a Hindu to fight, it is tampering with his religion," argued Greaves. "In India I have seen these docile blacks turn to demons, battling for forty-eight hours with hundreds of fatalistic Mohammedans, all because some Moslem had killed a bull dedicated to Shiva.

"Incidentally, I told the Brahmin he could dress up the bull for the Dasahara holidays."

Costaud glared.

"I won't revoke your word," he said, "because to show a difference of opinion among white men would be a display of weakness for these black swine. But in the future remember that Costaud is manager of Bukit Batu."

After dinner that night, Costaud drank only one *petit verre* instead of his usual three. Lighting a Burma cheroot to keep off the whining mosquitoes, he went out into the sultry night with some explanation of having a final look around the estate. Greaves was glad to be left alone. He returned to his own cottage and sat for a long time on his screened porch, watching a meager golden moon set behind a range of misty hills. As a quartet of bullfrogs added their hoarse bass to the shrill chorus of night noises from the jungle behind the cottage, he thought over his discoveries of the day. Bukit Batu was not paying, obviously, because perhaps half the latex was being thrown away instead of being made into rubber. Were the coolies doing this to spite Costaud? Hardly. The Belgian kept too close a watch over the Tamils for them to accomplish anything on so large a scale without his knowledge. Undoubtedly the Belgian was doing it himself. But why? As Greaves climbed under the mosquito-netting that covered his springless bed, he again wondered what part Ford had played in this fraud—aide, opponent, or merely dupe? Suppose he had opposed Costaud? The chirping noises of the little mosquito-eating lizards scampering over the bedroom ceiling were the only answer.

FOR the next few days, Greaves tried to lead Costaud's dinner conversation into pertinent channels. He would swing the talk around to the cave, to Ford, to the balance sheet of Bukit Batu, to what Costaud would do if the estate went under. The Belgian replied vaguely with talk about calcarious soil, about the disadvantages of plantation rubber over wild rubber in general and Bukit Batu in particular. Then he would talk about the superiority of the white man and what an unholy row these cow-worshipping Tamils were kicking up every night now that their heathen festival had begun. He would bellow for his brandy, drink his *petit verre*, light a cheroot, and walk out for "a final look around."

On the third night of this ineffectual word fencing, Greaves decided that he himself would have a look around. After a sharp, singing rain, the sky had cleared with tropical suddenness and a moon was shining through the glistening hevea leaves to make foliated patterns on the ground. Greaves saw Costaud walk off toward the north side of the estate and for some minutes watched him appear and disappear in patches of light and shade. When at the end of half an hour the Belgian had not returned, Greaves followed the direction he had taken.

As he approached Bintang Creek, Greaves thought he saw two men squatting on the bank. Something howled in the jungle, and they looked up nervously. One, Greaves could make out in the moonlight, was Costaud. The other was a Chinese; Foo Lam, he thought. The generous intervals between the regularly planted rubber-trees afforded little cover, but Greaves moved as close as he dared and stood in the shadow. Each of the two men was bending over a flat receptacle with which he would scoop up sand and water, rock gently, submerge, rock again, pour off and submerge again. The two men frequently stopped to listen, as though afraid of being seen. Greaves watched them for an hour, after which they moved into the darkness, apparently through for the evening. First the Chinese came tramping through the trees, followed a few moments later by Costaud.

Hardly had they passed him, when Greaves, eager at the thought that he had in his hands the key to the mystery of Bukit Batu, hurried to the creek. The bed of the shallow stream, reddened by the silt of down-country Selangor until it was of a different color than the soil of the estate, glowed ruddy even in the silver pallor of the moonlight. Greaves stooped by the waterside, thrust his hands into the water and drew up two dripping handfuls of sand. This he washed and sifted carefully from hand to hand. Then he took another. When all but a few grains had been washed away, there lay gleaming in the palm of one hand a metallic flake as big as a dime. He placed it between his teeth endwise and bit. The flake bent nearly double. Was it gold?

Very likely it was gold. There was gold in the Pahang River; Sir Harvey Goff-Lennox wanted to take it out. Bintang Creek ran into the Pahang. There should be gold in the creek, too. Greaves would be sure. He half walked, half ran to the darkened chemical shack to verify his find with a little *aqua regia*. The bubbling of a drop on the yellow flake satisfied him.

Here was the secret of the Belgian, the roistering soldier of fortune whose one concern was himself. He would ruin Bukit Batu as a rubber plantation. The Tamil coolies would be sent back to Madras. Then, unmolested with his few Chinese he could pan the gold in Bintang Creek until he was rich. He would get rid of the Chinese without difficulty; men have killed for gold often enough. In fact—the thought made him pause as he was locking up the chemical shack—Greaves wondered if Ford's cholera did not come from Bintang Creek.

As he passed the coolie lines, Greaves almost collided with Costaud. The Belgian was carrying a lantern, which showed that his face was flushed and his eyes glittered strangely.

"Walking?" he asked, staring fixedly at the red sand clinging to Greaves' shoes.

"Just having a final look around the estate," replied the young planter, increasing his stride as he continued to his cottage.

V

GREAVES tried to go to bed calmly and sleep as usual, but he dozed fitfully. He sensed that from now on he and Costaud would watch each other as cat watches mouse, with the rôle of mouse ultimately falling to the less alert. When he drowsed off it was to see the figure of the burly Belgian, wiping his mouth on the hairy back of his hand, proclaiming his doctrines of unscrupulous egoism. He started into consciousness at the least cracking of a timber, the squeaking of a bat, or a noise in the jungle. Toward dawn he slept.

He was awakened by the sound of a shot. Tearing away the mosquito netting, he sprang from bed. It was daylight and stifling hot. Outside a brain-fever bird was crying monotonously his crescendo lament. A Chinese boy stood in the doorway with a tray of tea and bananas, the fare on which all the British East awakens.

"Tea, *tuan*."

"Put it down."

Another shot. Greaves jumped to the window which gave on the jungle. He saw Costaud, an automatic in his upraised hand, shooting a huge bird's-nest fern out of the crotch of a gray-barked tree, fifty feet above the tops of the plantains and undergrowth. A third shot, followed by a shower of leaves. Greaves knew that the performance was for his benefit. The Belgian, flaunting his marksmanship, was preparing for a campaign of intimidation. In reply, Greaves dressed quickly, strapped on his revolver, walked out behind his own cottage, and shot down a fern ten feet higher in the same tree.

The morning passed in plantation routine and a hot, steaming rain.

Tiffin began in silence, but Greaves was careful to eat only that of which Costaud had eaten first. When the Belgian noisily washed down the last of his curry with ginger beer from a stone jug, Greaves ventured a remark about the damnable heat and the smothering humidity.

"Cholera weather," said Costaud.

Then he threw himself on his cot for his siesta. Supreme self-confidence, thought Greaves. He noticed, however, that the kitchen door remained open and that the Chinese cook was sharpening a carving-knife.

When the Belgian was snoring, Greaves left. Noon vapors were rising from the damp ground and not a breath of air was stirring. The very trees seemed to be sleeping in the blazing heat. Greaves went home to lie down for an hour, but, weary from his intermittent sleep of the night before, he fell into a heavy slumber. He dreamed that he was strapped to his cot and that Costaud was taking his revolver, slowly, tauntingly. He struggled, with that desperate impotence of dream struggles.

A shot awakened him. He felt for his gun. It was still in his holster. Costaud was continuing his defiant target practice outside. Greaves went out to repeat his answer.

He raised his arm, aimed at the clump of green far up on the smooth gray trunk, and pulled the trigger. There was a harmless click. Greaves examined the pistol. It was loaded. Again he pulled the trigger. Another click.

Then he saw that the firing pin had been removed.

Costaud, who had been watching in silence, replaced his gun with significant deliberateness, gave his mustache a savage twist, and swaggered into his cottage.

Greaves stood dazed for a moment. He struck a match to light a cigaret and was surprised to notice that his hand trembled. He had expected war, but the first overt act came as a shock nevertheless.

He must decide quickly. Either he must capitulate to Costaud—but that was out of the question. Then he must either kill or be killed. Could he kill Costaud? In cold blood, no. In self-defense—well, he would have to. But the Belgian would probably offer no opportunity for self-defense. He had begun the duel in an insidious manner. He would kill quietly, then report that his assistant had died of disease—of cholera.

Of cholera! Like Ford. The suspicion that had come tremulously the day he arrived at Bukit Batu and seen Ford's grave, now rushed back, girded with certainty.

Five minutes later he had a spade in his hands. He drove it into the ground behind the wooden cross over Ford's grave. It struck rock before it had sunk two feet. He shoveled away the middle of the mound. It was empty.

What had become of Ford? Murdered, without a doubt. Where?

Then he remembered the odor of putrefaction that he had noticed arising from the pit in the limestone cave. In his mind he reconstructed the scene. Ford had surprised Costaud dumping latex into the fissure. He had threatened to expose him. There were words, blows, a struggle—and Ford was reported dead of cholera.

So Costaud was a murderer. Still, the British respect of authority was strong in Greaves, and he hesitated to take the law into his own hands. In the jungle justice comes to him who goes after it, true. But a few hours away the jungle ended and at Kuala Lumpur British administrators and British institutions saw that justice ran in channels called civilized. Greaves voted for the law. After dark he would break for Kuala Lumpur, unobserved if possible. If Costaud interfered, there would be a battle to death. Otherwise Greaves would formally charge Costaud with murder and return with authority.

TO CONCEAL his plans, Greaves appeared as usual at dinner. He found Costaud unusually talkative. The Belgian raved about the folly of a young man working for any one but himself. Slaves, slaves to duty, to timidity, to employers. Some men did not recognize opportunity. He wished that some one had offered him a chance to make himself financially independent when he was Greaves' age.

Greaves appeared to be more interested in the procession of Tamils which was now wending its way from the coolie lines to the limestone cave. Two naked boys bearing flaming torches led the Hindu cortege, followed by a primitive orchestra of beating drums and squealing gourd instruments. Then came the pot-bellied Brahmin, his forehead smeared with dung ashes, the cast mark of Shiva worshipers, leading a hump-backed bull garlanded with jasmine blossoms. Scores of ash-smeared devotees followed, raising their arms above their heads and chanting in various keys and tempos.

"These are big days for the Tamils," said Greaves. "The Dasahara festival is going full blast. Before the tenth day they usually sacrifice something to the goddess Bhawani."

"Mr. Greaves." Costaud raised his heavy eyebrows. "Are you not paying too much attention to niggers—and to rubber?"

Greaves appeared to be contemplating the silhouette of the distant range of hills which was fading into the gathering night. Beyond the hills lay Kuala Lumpur.

"Queer custom, this veneration of the bull," he said. "But then we all have our peculiarities."

The stagnant air pulsated with drum beats. Snatches of a discordant chorus and the squealing of the gourd orchestra floated up through the dusk. The moon, struggling with a mass of surly black clouds, drew ghostly waves of pale light over the dark plantation.

Costaud was muttering to himself in French as he sipped his after-dinner brandy. When he refilled his glass for the third time, the talks and shouts of the coolies returning to the lines indicated that the ceremony was over.

Costaud drained his glass and went into the next room. He came back carrying a rifle.

"I think I'll go out for a final look around," he said.

"Expecting more wild elephants?" Greaves glanced at the rifle.

"Can't tell what I might shoot. There was something prowling around the estate last night that I probably should have killed." Costaud slammed the screen door behind him.

Flight or fight? Greaves was tingling with excitement as he bustled about his room, making final preparations for his night dash. Both, probably. If there was to be shooting it would not be one-sided. But he would reach the Malay States capital by dawn.

He wiped the grease from his rifle, in which he always kept a clip of shells. He threw back the bolt. The magazine was empty. Almost fearfully he drew from under his cot the moisture-proof case in which he kept his ammunition. It had been broken open and the shells stolen.

Out-generaled! Greaves threw his rifle on the cot. He picked it up again and started for the door. He came back, threw it down and pulled out a pipe. As the third match went out, he realized there was no tobacco in it. Then he laughed at himself, felt relieved at the sound of his voice, and sat down to consider his position.

To strike the road to Kuala Lumpur he would be forced to cross the clearing. To make a detour through the jungle behind the house was impossible, particularly as he was unarmed. He could skirt the hill to the coolie lines, but Costaud was probably at this very moment waiting behind the lines with his rifle cocked.

Greaves filled his pipe this time, puffed thoughtfully twice, and let it go out. He struck a match, but sat staring at the wall until the match burned his fingers. He snapped it to the floor, let his pipe drop from his mouth, and cautiously left the cottage from the rear. Then he threw himself to the ground and started crawling on all fours to the mouth of the limestone cave where the pot-bellied Brahmin, doubtless exhausted by the evening's incantations, lay sleeping by the side of Nandi, the sacred bull.

VI

COSTAUD was indeed waiting across the clearing. Squatting behind one corner of the whitewashed building where half the coolies slept, his rifle between his knees, he exhaled eloquently between his teeth whenever a passing cloud steeped the moonlit plantation in gloom. He kept his eyes fixed on the contour of the hill and the verandas of the European cottages which jutted out from the lower edge. The gloom thickened, the light-giving rifts became less frequent, and a peal of heavy thunder rolled around the horizon. Costaud uttered numerous *nom de Dieu's* and strained his eyes. He saw a light-colored patch moving among the dark foliage at the far base of the hill, and he raised his rifle.

The patch was moving toward him. It seemed about the height of a man crouching slightly. Costaud fired.

An animal roar followed the explosion, and a dirty, hump-backed bull with blood streaming from its shoulder rushed out into the clearing.

The Belgian's face was flushed with rage and disappointment. His eyes gleamed with hate, his hate of all black peoples, of these cow-worshiping Tamils, of any one who opposed the will of Jean Costaud—a hate now vented on a wounded bull which had strayed into the china shop of his well-laid plans. He raised his rifle again and emptied the magazine into the charging animal, which tottered and then rolled over.

Then, as though by divine stage-management, the moon burst from the clouds. Greaves, who after rousing the bull out of the cave and twisting his tail Hindu-fashion to send him to his martyrdom, was lying on the ground before the cave entrance, could see the consequences. He watched a score of jabbering Tamils, aroused by the shooting, straggle from the lines. He heard their chorus of mingled wails and angry cries, as they stood aghast at the sight of the dead bull and Costaud with his rifle.

More coolies joined them. The Brahmin ran past Greaves, holding aloft a torch, chanting, and calling for punishment for the sacrilege. Costaud swung about him with his empty rifle, sending one coolie after another sprawling. Still they came on. The Belgian was overpowered from the rear and dragged to the ground.

Greaves raised himself on his elbows as the howling bank of Tamils began to rush toward him, half dragging, half carrying the struggling Belgian. He heard the furious threats and curses of Costaud, now in French, now in English, above the wild clamor of the angry Asiatics. He saw the expression of rabid zeal on the shiny black face of the Brahmin, who, with his smoky torch, was herding the coolies toward the cave.

Greaves tried to rise, but was knocked down by the fanatical onrush, and a hundred bare feet passed over him. The tumult was at first muffled as the coolies poured into the cavern. Then the voice of the Belgian grew louder and louder, still blustering, still menacing. Suddenly it changed to a long cry from which all bravado was gone. Terror, despair, fear of the unknown—these were contained in that agonizing shriek. It came again, louder and more hopeless at first, then faded into silence, as though the voice were falling into a deep pit.

When Greaves limped into the cave, eery in the torchlight, the white-haired Brahmin was standing on the edge of the water-cut chasm, oblivious to the moisture dripping on his shoulders. He was smearing dung ashes on the foreheads of fifty Tamils who crowded about him, the palms of their hands pressed together before their faces. When he saw Greaves he stretched out his torch over the leaf-framed fissure, black and inexorable.

"O sahib," he said in a shaking voice, "we have avenged Nandi, the Bull of Shiva. We have sacrified to Bhawani."

* * *

That night all the Chinese disappeared from the plantation. When Greaves went to Kuala Lumpur to engage a new staff of domestic servants, he sent the following cablegram to Sir Harvey Goff-Lennox in London:

BUKIT BATU RUBBER PAYING STOP PLACER GOLD ON ESTATE STOP WILL RETURN LONDON WITH ASSAYS PLANS DREDGE INSTALLATION WHEN YOU SEND NEW RUBBER FOREMAN STOP COSTAUD DIED SUDDENLY CHOLERA GREAVES.

Part Two of

The DIAMOND MAKERS

by Selwyn Jepson

A Girl and a Man are caught in the net of the Cleverest Crooks of England

Preceding events briefly retold

David Shaw Gould was sitting on a bench by Waterloo Bridge, London, starving, fearing arrest for the suspected murder of Reuben Lipsheimer. He had called on the murdered man the evening before to retrieve a £40,000 pearl necklace which his mother had borrowed money on and repaid to Lipsheimer just previous to her death. The Jew had refused to give up the necklace knowing David's mother was dead and that David had no proof that she had repaid the loan. David left his house after a stormy session, slept in the park and read of his murder the following morning. The police were looking for David as he was the last person known to have been at the Lipsheimer home.

A seedy-looking stranger (Blenkiron) sat down on David's bench, exchanged commonplaces and finally invited him to share with him a smoked haddock. He ended the meal by offering David a job as an assistant to a chemist at Sommerford Keys, giving him money and directions how to reach the Keys on the morrow. David ate a hearty meal, returned to the park from habit. He arrived there just in time to prevent Ann Brunton from jumping into the Thames. She suffered under the delusion that she had killed Lipsheimer as she was there the night of the murder, before David was, and shot at Lipsheimer when he tried to embrace her. He had tripped over something and fallen and Ann fled believing she had killed him. David and Ann spent the night on the park bench, ate breakfast the following morning and parted as each had to go out of town that day for their respective employers.

Shortly after David entered the train for Sommerford Keys Blenkiron stepped into his compartment from the wrong side of the train, calmly announced he had shot a man who was spying on him. Just before the train started Ann entered the compartment and Blenkiron introduced her to David as his secretary. Both were astonished to find their employers one and the same person but did not admit their previous meeting to Blenkiron. During the journey Blenkiron explained that Prof. Massaroon, the man David is to assist, was about to *make* diamonds and hinted at possible interference and violence from *the other people*.

At one of the stops a man entered their compartment, immediately Mr. Blenkiron feigned sleep and covered his face with a newspaper. On getting out at Cirencester the new arrival knocked the paper from Blenkiron's face and sarcastically wished him good afternoon, addressing him as "Percy," and departed. Blenkiron was astounded as he had evidently believed the man to be dead. They ate lunch at Cirencester after which Ann and David had a confidential talk and agreed to aid each other. Neither of them felt free to desert Blenkiron as he has mysteriously learned of their presence at the Lipsheimer home the night of the murder and insinuated that they had best respect his wishes. Following this conversation they started walking to the Mill House, Sommerford Keys, which is their destination.

IV

THE Mill House at Sommerford Keys is not as well known as its architectural merit deserves that it should be, but perhaps its position has something to do with it. It occupies a corner of the countryside which is singularly isolated although topographically it is scarcely more than three miles from the source of the Thames. The Mill lies some two hundred yards from the stream on the north bank in the middle of an uncommonly thick wood.

The Mill is approached by a single narrow drive which winds its way up to the building, between gaps in the trees from the south and riverside edge of the wood. The Mill was built originally in twelve hundred and something, and consisted then of eight enormous cellars and, above ground, one square mill-room to the side of which was attached the mill-wheel. This, an enormous affair, depended for its power upon a miniature canal tapped from the river stream itself. The canal,however, was either lost or filled in long ago, and the wheel itself, or what little there is left of it, cannot have turned for three centuries.

The architectural interest is to be found in the manner in which at various periods additions have been made to the original structure until the whole covers nearly a quarter of an acre of ground. Every known and conceivable development of English architecture is represented; from the Gothic to the Renaissance; from Elizabethan to George the Third. It is amazing. The place rambles and rambles, with here a Gothic tower and there a patch of thatched roof, sometimes such inconsistencies adjoining one another so only an expert can tell you where one period ends and the next begins.

The color of this odd nightmarish conglomeration of bricks and mortar is a dull shade of green; the green obtained by a judicious mixing of mildew and age, while a large number of its outer walls are heavily clad with an almost black ivy, and for that matter, some of the inner ones also, for little effort appears to have been made to keep the place in order. Each landlord had suffered from the desire to build, not to repair, and, as if the work of his predecessors annoyed him, each has permitted damp and decay to go their way unhindered. In many places where the fall of a roof has been ignored, the ivy, climbing over the edge where the eaves have been, has adorned the inner surface of the wall with a living tapestry.

Perhaps an eighth part of the house is habitable, and the man from whom Mr. Blenkiron bought it reorganized the interior decoration with no little taste and expense. He even installed a system of central-heating and rebuilt one or two rooms to suit the period of the part he best liked, namely Adam, for he came from a house on Adelphi Terrace with his mind full of the proportions of that architect and proceeded to impress his unwise purchase with what he had learned.

In consequence Mr. Blenkiron had not done so badly but he had undoubtedly acquired a great deal of house which to an ordinary man would have been superfluous—but then Mr. Blenkiron was not an ordinary man. The photographs of the Mill House, which the owner had shown him, had pleased him, and he had bought, paying for his purchase with the mining rights of an extinct copper deposit in Rhodesia lest he discover later that he had been swindled. He had not been; that had been the lot of the man with the Adam mind.

It was in this place, then, that Mr. Blenkiron had established his scientist and to this place that Ann and David were brought. They came to it that August evening; up the winding, moss-grown drive through the larch wood to a great Moorish, bronze-plated door on which Mr. Blenkiron hammered five separate and distinct times with a stone.

At the end of some six or seven minutes it was opened by a little, squat, bald man with a fringe of white hair running round the back of his head from one ear to the other. He wore a velvet coat entirely covered with cigaret ash, and a pair of shelled-rimmed, thick-lensed spectacles. A cigaret hung listlessly from the corner of his mouth and he peered at the three on the step.

"Good afternoon, professor," said Mr. Blenkiron briskly while the other stared at him.

"So you've come!" he barked with surprising violence. "You're late! D'ye hear? You're late! Come in! Van Loon has got something for you to see. He nearly killed it, he tells me! Come in!"

As he spoke the cigaret waggled, and dropped a long fragment of ash down the front of his velvet jacket.

They walked past him, Mr. Blenkiron leading, down a dim, stone-flagged hallway, into a lofty, beautifully furnished room with a gold domed ceiling and paneled walls.

On the threshold Mr. Blenkiron came to

a sudden stop, and then stepped up to an armchair in which a man was sitting gagged and bound. His face was bronzed and wrinkled as from many suns and his little bright eyes glittered alertly at the sight of Mr. Blenkiron.

He was the man in the train whom Mr. Blenkiron had supposed dead. The man who had called him "Percy."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Blenkiron with deep satisfaction.

THERE followed a moment of silence in which nobody moved, and Mr. Blenkiron continued to stare at the man in the chair. David took in the situation swiftly, noticing the other occupant of the room, a tall, thin man with a cadaverous face, whom he presumed to be Van Loon. The professor himself was watching Mr. Blenkiron with a thoughtful, speculative expression which he managed to make apparent in spite of his disguising spectacles.

David's first thought, however, was for Ann; and he felt not a little anger with circumstances. The sight of the man in the chair, bound and helpless, was nothing if it was not disturbing, and emphasized the seriousness of the affair in which they were already so deeply involved. The girl was just behind the young man and a little to the side, and she gripped his arm when she saw the bound prisoner. He heard her catch her breath in a stifled exclamation of alarm.

The professor broke the silence with a sharp, aggressive question, sticking out his chin in the direction of the chair.

"Well! What is it?"

Mr. Blenkiron drew a deep breath.

"It is something I am very pleased to see—in such a condition," he said, and turned to the tall man. "How did it happen, Van Loon?"

"In der laboratory," he answered with a pronounced accent.

"Get on!" snapped the professor and lit a cigaret from the stub in his mouth.

"I was working on the burner," the Dutchman proceeded leisurely, "and there was a noise behind me. And I did look round and this man was standing inside the door with a pistol in his hand. He had me covered and he kept me with my hands up while he looked over everything, the furnace, the rays plant, the whole bag of tricks. Then I took a lump of metal which was piled up on the bench close by and I threw it at him, quick before he saw what I did. After that I collected him quite easily."

"H'm," muttered Mr. Blenkiron. "He didn't learn much?"

The Dutchman sucked his heavy lips thoughtfully.

"No," he said.

"Where were you, professor?"

"In the village; I have to buy some cigarets occasionally, curse you!"

"H'm," said Mr. Blenkiron. "You did well, Van Loon. I'm glad you didn't kill him—"

"It would have given me the greatest of pleasure," said the Dutchman regretfully. "I do not like men who point pistols at me. It is a dangerous thing to do."

"Never mind," remarked Mr. Blenkiron with a note of joyful anticipation in his voice. "You will have your opportunity later on. Take that gag off him. I want to talk to him."

Van Loon removed it deftly, and the sunburnt man moistened his lips with his tongue.

He regarded Mr. Blenkiron with bright eyes. The girl's fingers about David's arm relaxed and she moved up to his side. He became acutely conscious of her presence and comradeship, for he was still, although some time had passed since that absorbing moment after lunch, a little dumfounded by the knowledge that he was in love with her, and her nearness thrilled and disturbed him.

MR. BLENKIRON allowed a measure of time to elapse before he spoke, as though enjoying the situation. Then he said slowly:

"Zack, you gave me an unpleasant hour this afternoon."

The little man nodded and smiled.

"I had hoped to. I thought that perhaps even a hardened old devil like you, Percy, would have the decency to get het up over my resurrection."

"It is certainly surprising," admitted Mr. Blenkiron.

"Not to me," said the other. "Poor old Percy."

"Don't call me Percy!" snapped Mr. Blenkiron fiercely.

The bright eyes became inquiring.

"Isn't it your name? Ah! Forgive me. You have a new alias, of course. Percy the Punter, of Rhodesia, has become James Blenkiron of St. James' Street. Naturally."

"Shut up, answer my questions!" shouted the other loudly, and struck the helpless man across the mouth. Ann winced as the blow fell, but she made no sound. David frowned. It seemed as though Mr. Blenkiron had forgotten everything save the fact that he had an enemy at his mercy.

Mr. Zack took the blow calmly, but a trickle of blood ran down his chin from the corner of his mouth. He smiled cheerfully.

"Now you!" Mr. Blenkiron went on. "What the devil have you been up to? Where do you come in in this game?"

"Purely as a subsidiary element," said Mr. Zack. "I happened to run across Roberts in town the other day and he asked me if I was busy because, if I wasn't, he thought perhaps he could give me a little adventure, knowing my weakness for the exciting life. This diamond-making business became at once my interest. He knew I knew something about scientific stuff and so on, and asked me to run down unofficially and take a look at your work, professor. At the time I did not know you were one of the birds concerned, Percy, but when I saw you in the Cirencester train, I guessed. You couldn't be found in the neighborhood of dirty business without being in the middle of it—"

"Be civil," urged Mr. Blenkiron.

"So I hurried on ahead of you when I saw you going to the hotel. That's all."

"You caught the eleven o'clock from Paddington and got out at the wrong station by *accident?*"

"I assure you of that. After the veldt I'm a perfect fool with railways and things. By the way. You remember that .12 bore gun with which you murdered me? I had it engraved to commemorate the occasion. 'Used by Percy the Punter on July 14th, 1907. He *would* use blank cartridges.' Rather effective don't you think?"

"Blank cartridges be damned!" exclaimed Mr. Blenkiron with sudden heat.

"That is probably your sentiment," interrupted Mr. Zack. "But by my very existence now I think I prove my statement. Besides, I personally put them in the breech of your gun after emptying the shot out of them, so I ought to know. You see I had my suspicions about you." He turned his head toward the silent bystanders, and asked blithely: "Do you blame me?"

THIS had the effect of reminding Mr. Blenkiron of their presence, and he raised his hand to strike again. The little man watched him narrowly, but he did not flinch. It occurred to David that Mr. Zack either possessed a peculiar type of courage or entertained for Mr. Blenkiron the same fearless hatred which he himself felt toward that gentleman, but, whichever it was, it was pleasant to see. He began to have a certain admiration for the little man, whose cheerful disregard for Mr. Blenkiron and what he could do was unsullied by any alarm.

The Rhodesian heard the next words with indifference.

"Zack, I am going to get you this time." Mr. Blenkiron seemed to swell to a gigantic size as he spoke, towering above Mr. Zack with unalterable resolve. "You will not leave this house. You are going to disappear from the face of the earth—like that—" he waved his hand, "you may as well know at once, you interfering fool, that I am going to have you killed; d'you hear? Killed! Van Loon, here, is one of the greatest living experts in one particular form of inflicting death."

"Oh, yes!" interjected Van Loon and cracked his fingers unpleasantly.

"And," finished Mr. Blenkiron, "you can have until tomorrow morning to think out some method of suitably inscribing, for the purpose of commemoration, the instrument used on this occasion. Mr. Van Loon uses no weapon. He strangles with his bare hands."

"Oh, yes!" the Dutchman said again.

Mr. Zack appeared to ponder the matter dispassionately. Then he said:

"You're a foolish old man, Percy. I suppose you know what will happen if I vanish? It will bring Roberts down on you and your crowd with every policeman in England at his back."

Mr. Blenkiron laughed.

"When he's got a bullet out of his knee."

The Rhodesian lifted his eyebrows.

"Yes," said Mr. Blenkiron. "I put it there about an hour and a quarter after you left Paddington. He rather foolishly followed me to the station. It was quite enough. It was a confession that he was taking an active part in things. He ought to realize that he's thrown away a good thing by now, and that he can't get it back."

"Well, well," sighed Mr. Zack.

Mr. Blenkiron lost his temper again.

"Take him away," he shouted. "Take him away before I break his damned neck myself!"

Van Loon stepped forward, picked the little man out of the chair as if he had been a child, flung him across his shoulder and carried him out of the room. Mr. Zack's voice floated back, entirely undismayed, if somewhat jerky from Van Loon's movement.

"You never could keep your temper, Percy. It'll be the ruin of you yet!"

"Tschk-k!" said Mr. Blenkiron, and ground his teeth.

IT WAS after dinner that night; one of the strangest dinner parties David had ever attended, which had been served by one of the oldest and deafest housekeepers in the world. They had returned to the room with the golden ceiling, used, he learned, as the household's sitting-room.

Ann had chosen a big chair on one side of the fireplace, in which a fire was burning, because, as the professor explained, "the barn of a house was like a morgue on the hottest night," and David sat opposite her so that he could watch the play of firelight on her face. On a broad settee facing the fire Mr. Blenkiron, the professor, and Van Loon sat in a row and smoked. The only movement they made was to flick the ash from their cigars into the fireplace, save the professor, who, in what David now recognized to be his habit, permitted his to cascade down the front of his velvet coat.

David also smoked a cigar, which had been presented to him proudly by Van Loon with the gratuitous information that it was one of the best that had ever eluded the British Customs. He explained that he had so many friends who traveled continuously to and from Holland that he scarcely ever, if at all, had to smoke the legitimate article.

"That reminds me," broke in Mr. Blenkiron, "that in view of the sudden tourist traffic in the direction of this historical mansion it might be as well to employ a few gardeners—or shall we say gamekeepers? Could you get hold of some, Van Loon?"

The professor nodded approvingly and the Dutchman spread out his bony hands.

"Why not? When you want them?"

"As soon as possible, before we—er—are overrun by these—er—colonials." Mr. Blenkiron blew a cloud of smoke into the air and contemplated its blue folds.

"Tomorrow, yes?" said Van Loon.

"I think it would be as well."

"How many would be necessary?"

"Twelve—or perhaps fourteen."

The Dutchman rose by instalments from the settee, which was a little low for his height.

"I will telephone," he said obligingly, and left the room.

Mr. Blenkiron and the professor sat on in silence, smoking, and wrapped in thought for all the world like two benevolent deities.

David looked casually across at the girl and saw that her eyes were troubled. He smiled reassuringly at her.

But the game was getting bigger.

THREE hours later David lay in bed, sleepless. He had retired with the rest of the household an hour or more ago. There was much to be done tomorrow, Mr. Blenkiron had said, urging early bed, and in truth there was.

There was, for instance, the matter of Mr. Zack, and it was a matter David could not get out of his head. It was troubling Ann, too. Her last words to him, standing at the door of her room across the corridor, had been:

"I shan't sleep with the thought of that poor man shut up and about to—to—be strangled, to keep me awake. Oh! He's a devil!"

No name was necessary. Mr. Blenkiron *was* a devil, but it seemed an inadequate word for him. He was so much more. David stared upward at the ceiling, which was barely reached by the light of his bedside lamp so high was it, and turned over in his mind the developments of the day. He was aware that although the night preceding had been rich with amazing incidents, they were scarcely to be remembered in the light of those which had filled the hours of daylight.

He could not bring himself to face with equanimity the approaching death of the little man from Rhodesia. He was not squeamish, but he could find no justice in Mr. Blenkiron's point of view, expressed in the presence of Mr. Zack and later at dinner, that the world needed this death as a salutary measure. It was obvious both to ear and eye that it was not so much the world as Mr. Blenkiron himself who stood in such a need. The financier had given no satisfactory reason for his conviction about Mr. Zack; indeed, he had given no reason at all. He had simply stated his intention of having Van Loon strangle the intruder after breakfast; and he had not cared who heard about that intention. The presence of his lady-secretary had not deterred him in the slightest.

At the time when the matter was under discussion, or more exactly under monolog, the professor had devoted far more attention to the scientific cracking of nuts than he had to Mr. Blenkiron. Obviously it did not matter a jot to his ferocious nature whether a man was to be strangled after breakfast or not. Van Loon, the expert in murder, was of course the last source of possible help.

The more he thought about the thing the more unhappy he became. At the end of three minutes his speculation had led him to a decision. He would find out, not from Mr. Blenkiron but from Mr. Zack himself, what it was all about. The moment this policy entered his mind there came another thought.

If Mr. Zack had not been bluffing, and it seemed unlikely that he had been, a police investigation following his disappearance would not involve Mr. Blenkiron alone. It would involve Ann and himself.

He got out of bed, pulled his trousers over his pajamas, slipped on a pair of socks, took the life-preserver from the suitcase and sat on the edge of the bed to consider the likely whereabouts of the prisoner. He had one clue. Van Loon had said that Mr. Zack was occupying the room next to his, so that he could keep an eye on him, and Van Loon slept on the floor above. He knew this because the Dutchman had mounted a staircase at the end of the corridor after he had shown David to his bedroom, and while David had been undressing there had been movements in the room immediately above.

The undertaking might not be so difficult.

He took a box of matches from the side of the lamp, opened the door carefully, and got out into the corridor without having made a sound.

The corridor was in absolute darkness except for a thin line of light under Ann's door. He waited a moment, listening, and then with one hand touching the wall and the other grasping the life-preserver he made his way cautiously in the direction of the staircase up which Van Loon had disappeared. At the end of forty paces he stopped, and after again reassuring himself that silence reigned, struck a match. It showed him the staircase. He extinguished the match and put it in his pocket. There was no point in neglecting little things.

Five minutes later he was standing breathless on the next floor after negotiating eighteen steps of which seventeen had creaked with an explosive resentfulness that he should tread on them. But the quietness of the house was still unbroken. He ventured another match and found himself facing a corridor similar to the one below. He put a hand on the guiding wall and counting carefully came to a halt at the end of forty paces, which according to his calculations had brought him to Van Loon's room. He felt the framework of a door and realized that the worst part of the expedition had yet to come. He had got to discover which was Mr. Zack's prison and in the discovering exercise extreme care that he did not disturb Van Loon or anybody else. And having accomplished this he had to get to Mr. Zack through a door that would undoubtedly be locked.

No sound came from the Dutchman's room. He might be asleep. David strained his ears for the slightest creak of a bed-spring, and once he thought he heard something. He waited, holding his breath the better to hear. It came again—and again; then regularly—a dull, heavy snoring.

He straightened his back with relief and struck another match, holding it high above his head. It threw a poor light over a radius of about six yards and showed two doors; one opposite Van Loon's and another a dozen paces beyond it on the same side. David peered eagerly while the flame lasted in order that he might visualize their positions in the dark, and then blowing out the match he dropped the fragment in his pocket as before, and moved forward to investigate. He tried the handle of the nearest door first and it opened with a cracking of paint which proved that it had not moved on its hinges for months. He closed it softly and went silently on to the second. He put his hand on the knob, and then smiled thoughtfully; his knuckles were touching a key. His wits worked swiftly. People do not leave keys of bedrooms on the *outside* of the door.

He pressed an ear to the panel and heard sounds of movement which required no effort of his imagination to translate. Mr. Zack was fighting with his bonds. David tapped softly on the door, heard the sounds come to a sudden end, and began to turn the key slowly in the lock. It moved easily, but he took his time at it because he wanted to impress the man inside with the fact that such caution might portend help. He was equally deliberate in turning the knob, although it moved as easily as the key. He pushed the door quickly open, stepped inside, and closed it.

Then he struck a match.

MR. ZACK lay strapped to a bed in the middle of a bare room. He was also bound hand and foot, and the gag was back in his mouth and held there securely by a strip of scarlet silk; as completely trussed as a man could be. His eyes were like pin-points of light as he surveyed the young man.

David put the end of the match in his pocket, felt his way quickly to the bed and whispered in Mr. Zack's ear:

"There's something I want to ask you," he said, "and I want to help you, so for God's sake keep quiet."

Then he ungagged the little man, and asked:

"Why did Blenkiron want to shoot you?"

Mr. Zack, keeping his voice low, commented on the suddenness of Davids' appearance.

"You nearly frightened me out of my wits, young man. I thought for a second that it was Dutchy, impatient to be about his work. Why did Percy try to shoot me? Because he wanted full shares instead of half-shares in a sapphire mine we were working together. He got frightened, however, when he thought he'd done me in, and ran. I got four millions for the mine a month later. If Percy hadn't been so greedy he might have had two of 'em and stayed respectable. But why? Did the thought of my horrible fate keep you awake?"

"More or less."

"Well; I thought you were too bright a looking chap to be really at one with friend Percy. I'll give you fifty thousand to cut these blasted straps," said Mr. Zack.

"I don't want your money," replied David. "I merely dislike Blenkiron and his methods." And he began feeling for the buckles of the straps.

This refusal of a bribe seemed to take Mr. Zack aback. Then he said earnestly.

"By God, then youngster, if you won't have my money you shall have my friendship!"

"Good," remarked David, "and I'd like also your promise that you won't bring the police down on this place. There are other people concerned in this besides Blenkiron."

"So I see. Well, she looks like a damn good girl. I won't ask your reasons for sticking in this sort of game, but I'll wish you a long and happy married—"

"Shut up!" said David. "If you're going to get out of this place alive you've got to think, not talk. I have your promise about the police?"

"Surely. There's no likelihood of my wanting to spoil the fun yet awhile. It hasn't begun, and it's fun I'm looking for. I tell you, young man, when a man's got more money than he can spend he has some difficulty in getting fun. Money drags a fellow down—makes him responsible, and all that sort of thing. Thank God it hasn't got me that way—yet."

By this time Mr. Zack was free from his bonds. He sat up and chafed his wrists.

"Now," said David. "How am I going to get you out of the house and leave things so that it's obvious you got out without help? There's going to be a damn fine row in the morning and I don't propose to be the helpless victim instead of you."

"You shan't be. Give me that box of matches and get back to your bed. I'll fix things," said Mr. Zack confidently. "I've got it all cut and dried."

David thought for a moment, and then said:

"The key is still in the lock and Van Loon's room is the first on the right going toward the stairs. He was snoring when I came in. Lord knows why I trust you. I suppose my dislike of Blenkiron is getting the better of me. Keep out of the laboratory."

"You trust me because I'm trustworthy," stated Mr. Zack as one giving forth an axiom. "And you go on hating Percy.

It's a healthy sign. I know the Dutchy's room. The laboratory's safe—there's nothing to be learned there. Good night."

"Good night," said David, and wondered at the calmness of Mr. Zack. He seemed to be completely in command of his own destiny. The young man was half-way to the door when he heard the other's sibilant whisper.

"What's your name, youngster?"

David gave it to him in full. It was odd how instinctively he trusted him, but he did.

Ten minutes later he resisted the desire to knock on Ann's door and tell her that she might sleep in peace. It would have been unwise since she might have called to know who it was before coming to the door. And for that matter her night might well be disturbed on account of the risk he had incurred, assuming that she cared at all—which he could not help but hope.

At last he slept.

V

CONSCIOUSNESS the following morning came to at least three members of the party with a strong sense of apprehension. It came thus to David, because his fears of overnight, that his part would be discovered, returned, while Ann awoke after fitful sleep with the knowledge that a man was to be murdered after breakfast. But the feelings of these two people were as nothing to the feelings of the Dutchman, Van Loon, particularly since he had had from about three A.M. to consider them. At that early hour his day began, and as the sky brightened the unpleasantness of the predicament, in which he was, increased apace.

Breakfast had been fixed for nine o'clock, and at that time David arrived down-stairs in the dining-room simultaneously with the professor, who at once lit a cigaret, attached it loosely to the corner of his lower lip, and began to stride up and down in front of the wide bay window. He made no effort to greet David, who by reason of his apprehension was content to be allowed to stand unnoticed by the breakfast table and look out on the wood. The slanting rays of morning sunlight struggled through the thick-set tops of the larches and penetrated as far as the house only in a diffused fashion. It would be another hot day.

The next arrival was Ann. She smiled at David, and he bade her good morning, noticing that the simplicity of her white linen blouse and light brown gabardine skirt suited her girlish freshness. But there were shadows of sleeplessness under her deep eyes, and he frowned at the sight of them. She deserved to sleep well, just as she deserved to have everything else in her life smooth and pleasant. She seemed so very young to be troubled.

The professor glanced at her without ceasing his thoughtful perambulation or removing the cigaret from his mouth, grunted a monosyllable at her which might have been the beginning of "good morning."

Then the door opened and Mr. Blenkiron bustled in. He was attired in a suit of the loudest brown and white check that had ever sullied a tailor's stock. Indeed, his tailor had probably hailed him as a long-sought excuse and ridded himself of several yards of the material in one magnificent flourish. The financier was quite as cheerful of soul as he was of sartorial creation, and he boomed his "good day" at the three occupants of the room.

"Ring the bell, somebody," he said. "I'm devilish hungry. Sleep well, Miss Brunton?"

"Yes, thank you," she lied, and David saw that she kept her eyes from the fury of her employer's clothes. After a bad night they were shattering.

The old housekeeper shambled in with a tray.

"Where's Van Loon?" asked Mr. Blenkiron. "Not down?"

"I haven't seen him," said David.

"Well! Well! You might run up and give him a call. We've got a lot to do to-day." Mr. Blenkiron washed his hands with invisible soap and water.

"Where is his room?" David asked with admirable cunning.

"The floor above yours," said Mr. Blenkiron. "Continue up the stairs and his is the second door on the left in the corridor facing you. Tell him we've started breakfast."

David went eagerly. He wanted to see Van Loon's face when he discovered that Mr. Zack had gone. He would assuredly look into the Rhodesian's room before coming down-stairs.

But the door of Van Loon's room was shut, as was also that behind which Mr.

Zack had languished. David knocked on the Dutchman's door, and, while waiting for response he happened to glance down and see a spent match lying a few inches from his foot. He bent quickly, picked it up, and put it in his pocket with the ends of those he had used in the adventure of the early hours. Mr. Zack had been careless about little things.

But about the big things he had not been careless, as David saw, when receiving no answer to a second tattoo on the door, he opened it and looked in.

Mr. Van Loon had not risen, but the fact was due neither to sleepiness nor laziness.

He could not have risen had he tried, for he was lying face downward on the bed, held thereto by the very straps with which he had confined Mr. Zack. He was also bound hand and foot with cords in a manner which prevented the smallest movement, and Mr. Zack's gag, the strip of red silk, was tied round his head, tightly covering his mouth. He presented the most complete picture of impotency David had ever seen, and not unnaturally he exclaimed aloud at the sight.

Then, without stopping to investigate further he hurried down-stairs to the dining-room. On the threshold he ceased smiling in admiration of Mr. Zack's methods, and burst in upon the assembled household.

"For God's sake come and look!" he said urgently and, turning immediately, led the way to Van Loon's room with Mr. Blenkiron close at his heels, questions pouring from his lips. The professor and the girl followed less speedily.

At the sight of the figure on the bed Mr. Blenkiron called out like a man in acute pain and, turning, dashed toward Mr. Zack's prison. He dragged the door open, cried out again, and slammed it. He was back in the Dutchman's room and bending over the recumbent Van Loon, when the professor and Ann arrived.

"The little beast has got away!" he wailed. "This damned fool here—"

He stopped and pointed bereft of words.

Mr. Zack had ripped Van Loon's pajama jacket neatly in half, exposing his back, and across his shoulders had scratched with some instrument just sharp enough to break the skin:

AUGUST 21st. HE WOULD SLEEP.

Mr. Blenkiron howled as the significance of the thing struck him.

Once again Mr. Zack had seen fit to suitably inscribe the instrument by which he was to have been murdered.

"Untie him, David," said the financier weakly. "The damned, inefficient dolt!"

And David, for the second time in twelve hours, unstrapped a helpless victim. As he did so he caught a glimpse of Ann's eyes. They were shining happily.

Presently, with Van Loon's doubtful help, for he was still considerably dazed, they reconstructed what had happened. Mr. Zack had simplified his task by hitting him violently on the head while he slept with one of Van Loon's own boots, thereby enabling him to tie him up and perform his commemoration rite unhindered by any struggle.

"But didn't you lock him in?" plaintively demanded Mr. Blenkiron, whose peace of mind was now permanently shattered.

"Of course I locked him in," snapped the Dutchman, irritable because his head ached and he was getting no sympathy.

"I suppose you didn't leave the key in the lock?"

This staggered Van Loon and he stopped looking aggrieved.

"Vell, yes, I did. Vhy not?"

"Because, you bone-headed idiot, a man of Zack's caliber could turn that key from the inside as easily as you could turn it from the outside."

"But he was roped up."

"Well, he unroped himself, that's all," said Mr. Blenkiron, and he sat down suddenly on the bed and mopped his face. The exaggerated cheerfulness of his garb struck a jarring note when compared with the unadulterated gloom of his expression.

David's relief that his employer should have so easily found an explanation for Mr. Zack's escape was unbounded, and he recognized that he owed not a little to Mr. Blenkiron's characteristic desire to score off his fellow creatures. His disappointment, chagrin and fear were not to be gaged, but that they had come together in the form of anger with Van Loon was a comprehensible process of psychology. And it was while he was in this anger that he attributed powers to Mr. Zack which, if scrutinized coolly would have proved little short of miraculous.

David was profoundly thankful for that anger; for it had turned suspicions, and therefore investigation, aside.

Breakfast was a gloomy meal. Nobody spoke and the professor displayed a new and irritating habit of working out mathematical problems on the table-cloth with a stub of a pencil. Also he grudged the time his mouth was occupied with food in that it deprived him of his comforting cigaret. He smoked incessantly in the intervals between eating.

Only once did Mr. Blenkiron break the silence. Then he said:

"Thank God those devils of yours are coming, Van Loon. I shan't feel safe until they're on the job."

"I asked my friend to send capable gamekeepers," said the Dutchman, scratching his back with his long fingers, for Mr. Zack's inscription itched. "They will be here by twelve o'clock," he added. His mien was apologetic.

Mr. Blenkiron wolfed an egg ferociously and then said loudly:

"Blast Zack; blast Zack!"

The rest of then respected his feelings with a silence which lasted until the meal was finished. The signal to rise was given by the professor, who threw down his table-napkin and barked:

"This morning I'm going to assemble the rays plant, Van Loon. Mr. David had better come and give a hand although he'll probably be more or less of a dam' nuisance than anything else," and he peered through his spectacles at the assistant Mr. Blenkiron had brought down. He seemed to be noticing him for the first time.

"And this afternoon you're going to have another shot at producing something?" asked Mr. Blenkiron.

"Yes!" snapped the professor. "You're in a hurry, aren't you? Think of the work! Think of the work!"

The other nodded.

"I know," he said. "You're paid to do it."

"Don't I know it!" cried the professor bitterly, and stumped quickly to the door. "It's always the way! We poor devils have the brains and you swine make the money out of 'em!" And he disappeared through the doorway like an indignant rabbit—if a rabbit can be indignant.

Mr. Blenkiron sighed deeply.

"Get along David," he said. "Miss Brunton, we'll deal with a few letters in the study."

DAVID was a little disappointed by the laboratory in which such an amazing dream was to be accomplished: it had not that atmosphere of mysterious complexity of apparatus which he had expected. An ordinary chemical laboratory had more paraphernalia.

It was a long, narrow room on the first floor with straight windows along one side overlooking the wood. There were doors at each end and a big bench running down the center of the room; tables, covered with uninteresting-looking tools and boxes were ranged against the wall opposite the windows. The bench itself, however, was more intriguing.

At one end was a tall black object not unlike a giant pepper-pot, about three feet high, made of some dull metal. At the other, and connected with the bottom of the metal thing by a mass of electric cables was what looked at first sight to be a complicated X-rays plant. There was a good deal of vulcanite and brass work about it, and by its side was a small dynamo. On the floor, screwed to steel plates, was an ordinary petrol engine with a belt drive up to the dynamo. The X-rays machine was partly in pieces, and a multitude of wires and fittings were strewn about the bench. Altogether there did not seem to be much space or apparatus required in the manufacture of diamonds by the Massaroon method.

The professor and Van Loon took overalls from a cupboard and, putting them on, fell to work on the electrical end of the bench. David stood at the end, watching them, until the professor, moving round to a vice clamped on the corner, caught sight of him.

"Hold these!" he barked, and thrust a handful of small objects into his hands. David clung to them obediently, while the professor filed at a brass terminal which he had clamped in the vice.

Ten minutes later he fidgeted short-sightedly amidst the litter and then remembered.

"Gimme those!" he said, and David handed them back. It was not particularly interesting work. Van Loon whistled soundlessly between broken, discolored teeth and occasionally complained about his headache.

David considered the scientist from another point of view, understanding him for the first time. He saw how the man must have sacrificed things in order to make his theories practical; how much the conditions under which he had to work irked his spirit. His heart was not in the diamond-making, which was simply one of the many things to which it was possible to apply his discoveries; his scientific soul was in his new type of ray, to the exclusion of everything else. He, too, probably hated Mr. Blenkiron on account of the power he wielded.

The two men worked in silence for a while, and David helped them occasionally by holding or fetching things until the professor accused him suddenly of getting in the way and drove him from the laboratory.

"Go for a walk!" he barked. "Pick flowers! Do anything you like, but don't bother me!"

So David betook himself from the scene of their labors and found his way eventually into the open air and the edge of the wood.

It occurred to him that a little judicious exploration of the house's surroundings might result in knowledge of possible value, and since he had nothing better to do he set about it. For some time he studied his bearings, and the relation of the house to the wood and the direction of the river. He ignored the drive, the general disposition of which he already knew, and plunged into the depths of the wood with the intention of making his way to the farther side and the river.

It took him something over half an hour to accomplish the journey, and had he not been gifted with a well-dowered sense of direction it would have taken him longer. At last he broke through a thicket of blackberry brambles and reached a narrow stretch of open grassland which separated the wood from the bank of the river. He walked across and gazed at the narrow stream, the thin beginnings of the Thames, which in the course of some two hundred miles would swell to a breadth and depth that made navigation possible to the largest liner afloat. It was a deliberate stream, conscious even thus early of its ultimate importance.

He came out of the wood by the side of the house in a dream and followed the narrow path toward the front door with instinctive feet. His head was bent and his eyes blind to everything.

He thought only of Ann. He could not lose her! She must love him! Must! Must! He clenched his fists in the wave of almost physical determination which besieged and overcame every other emotion.

Then, as he came to a corner in the moss-covered wall, the sound of swift footsteps caught his ear; but his faculties of perception were slow, still under a weight of mental and spiritual turmoil. He looked up just a fraction too late to realize fully that it was Ann, with a flush of color in her cheeks, running toward him. He saw her even as he turned the corner and the next moment, to save her from falling as she strove to check her speed and avoid a collision, he instinctively caught her in his arms.

The effect of the physical contact with her destroyed all question and conjecture in his mind. All his thoughts, all his emotions, were still blindly focused in his determination never to lose her; never to let her go; and in the moment he held her the fear that he might never make her love him returned with ungovernable force.

Suddenly, at the instigation of unreasoning impulse, he tightened his arms about her soft body and without a word kissed her full on her parted lips.

He held her thus for a bare fraction of a second, breathless. Then she struggled, and, even as he relaxed the muscles of his arms, freed herself and stood away from him, her breath coming quickly.

"You!" she cried wildly, her eyes bright with scorn. "*You too!*"

Then, with a swift movement of her right hand she struck him furiously in the face, and turning, fled the way she had come.

David stood stock still for a moment sobered, angry, miserable and uncomprehending, staring down at the ground.

Why? Why had she done that? Why had she struck him? Why had she been running?

"Me, too?" he muttered. "Me *too!*"

He looked up, as in a flash of blinding light understanding came.

"My God!" he said aloud. "*Blenkiron!*"

VI

IT IS a little disconcerting to be thinking of a young woman, of one's love for her—and then to be slapped in the face by her! So David felt. To be sure, he had kissed her rather suddenly. But she should have understood. After what had passed between them she ought to have known that he had meant well, that she could have no reason to feel offended!

While David stood by the moss-covered wall of the southwest corner of the Mill House and digested the things that he had experienced, his employer, Mr. Blenkiron, sat at a Chippendale desk by the open Saracen window of a room overlooking the drive on the first floor. A pile of papers lay before him and on a little table a few feet away a portable typewriter lay open.

He was leaning slightly forward with a vacant, bemused expression on his normally alert face, and with his left hand he caressed his left cheek. He dabbed at it tentatively with the tips of his fingers and pressed it with his palm; he stroked it and he rubbed it, and occasionally he fanned it. It was during such intervals when his hand was away from his face, that an observant eye would have seen four angry red marks running parallel to one another across the wide field of sleek, flabby flesh.

They were marks left there by the hand of Ann a few minutes before. Mr. Blenkiron could see her still, a picture of flaming and indignant wrath, for in a moment of expansive good-humor, a reaction after his grievous disappointment at the loss of Mr. Zack, he had endeavored to kiss his secretary by the simple but easily thwarted maneuver of approaching her from behind while she was busy at the typewriter.

She had administered the chastening blow with commendable strength, accuracy and presence of mind, considering the surprise element in his attack. She had immediately and hurriedly left the room and run out of the house.

It was the first time, where she was concerned, that Mr. Blenkiron had given rein to his amorous spirit, and now that he reflected he was wondering how his generalship could have been so poor, why he should have chosen such an unpromising moment.

But subconsciously it had been coming for some little while. It always did, eventually. This time, however, his feelings had been stimulated by the glimpse he had had the day before of David and the girl standing close to one another in the dining-room of the *Bull and Bush*. At the time he had not suspected for a moment that they had been kissing one another, for they had only just met.

Now, however, with the sting of her blow still tingling in his cheek, it occurred to him that they might have been. It seemed scarcely in accordance with the girl's quiet, almost to his mind "prudish" nature, but on the other hand, how was a man to account for such a reception of his advances if it was not by the fact that he had been forestalled?

Mr. Blenkiron was aware of a growing sense of resentment, firstly against his secretary and secondly against the young man he had saved from starvation. Considering all things, and in particular the position in which they were placed by circumstances, it seemed a little indecent.

The young fellow ought to know which side his bread was buttered on! Who the devil did he think he was, anyway?

Mr. Blenkiron's resentment gave place to a righteous anger which perhaps would not have arisen had he been present at the scene which had just taken place between the two people in question. But he had not been, and in the intervals between nursing his burning cheek and scowling at the opposite wall he fanned his wrath and laid plans for the betterment of his employees' senses of value.

They appeared to be forgetting Reuben Lipsheimer.

MR. BLENKIRON was a man of pride, perhaps of conceit, and he was proud of his subtlety in holding two relucant people to his will and service with the certainty that his secrets were safe in their hands. The ordering of fate which had given him the necessary knowledge had been strange, but in the situation that had arisen there were elements that were unique in his experience of plot and intrigue. The death of his friend and associate Reuben Lipsheimer had set in motion as intricate a loom as had ever woven human lives into the pattern of its cloth. And he, of all people the most fitted, stood with both hands on the controls of that loom, a position which gave to him a sense of power such as he had never before enjoyed and which was all the more agreeable in view of the speculative project he was seeking to accomplish. He had been conscious of the difficulties before him and the advent of these two helpers made his self-assurance more complete.

This little incident of the kiss, then, was annoying him from at least two points of view; that of a male human being and that of a conscious instrument of destiny, and he decided that it must be put right at once. Ann Brunton must be shown that she was not in a position to refuse or grant privileges at will, and David must be made to understand that it would be wiser to confine his activities to the sphere of his particular job—helping Massaroon and guarding his employer's interests.

After further deliberating Mr. Blenkiron came to the conclusion, helped by the pain which still lingered in his cheek, that the girl should be dealt with first, and he mentally arranged that she should interview him soon—before lunch if possible.

Having to some extent recovered his temporary loss of dignity, and omnipotency, he turned his attention to the last letter Ann had typed, which lay on top of the pile of papers in front of him. It was to his partner and dealt shortly with the professor's work. It had no prefix and read more like a report than a letter, although letter it certainly was. It ran thus:

> I have seen the specimens of Massaroon's first attempt, about which he wrote, and they are promising in that they are big crystals. He assures me that the flaws in them are due to his mistake in estimating the heat required. He has since gone over his calculations again and discovered that he did not allow for solar radiation as it affected the world in its early stages. There is, apparently, a definite law regarding this.
>
> Either this afternoon or tomorrow morning, he will be ready to make another effort and he is sure of some measure of success. He is working conscientiously if a little resentfully, and I think that from him we have nothing to fear. Gould is behaving himself and is settling down.
>
> One unpleasant thing, however, has happened. A man I used to know in Africa has suddenly appeared on the scene on behalf of the Roberts crowd. He broke in yesterday afternoon and disturbed Van Loon at work in the laboratory, holding him up and examining Massaroon's rays plant. This was luckily more or less in pieces and he could have learned nothing. He was captured for a time but succeeded in getting away.
>
> In order to prevent any more visitations I instructed Van Loon to get hold of some of his disreputable friends who will be disposed about the house and grounds as servants and gamekeepers. They arrive today.

Here the letter finished abruptly and after a moment's consideration Mr. Blenkiron took it to the typewriter and added a few more paragraphs. He spent some little time and thought over it, choosing his words. He wrote:

> I am quite easy in my mind about the people here with the exception of Van Loon. You remember, of course, the circumstances under which we got hold of him and the discussion we had at the time regarding his safety. You maintained that your hold over him, although indirect, was sufficiently strong to keep him straight—as far as we were concerned—while I suggested that a man wanted for four murders in Holland and two in the States, to say nothing of grand larceny in Amsterdam—diamonds you will recall—might be a sufficiently desperate character not to care particularly what he did.
>
> He is not, like Gould, a naturally law-abiding citizen. He is that dangerous combination of a moral anarchist and a primordial brute. He would wring a cat's neck for the love of the thing. Well, I have been watching him carefully since I arrived and I detect a subtle air of anticipatory triumph about him, as though he had some scheme up his sleeve of which he expects success. He might be biding his time with a course of action hatched and ready to put in motion. When one comes to regard his position one sees how favorable it is if he is plotting anything—such as stealing the results of Massaroon's experiments, which, frankly, is what I think it is.
>
> He has allied himself with Massaroon's work—knows the theory of it as well as the professor himself—and is a diamond expert to boot. He knows diamonds and knows the diamond market, and of all of us he is far the most fitted to handle any product we get. As the result of all this my advice is to sack him; and if necessary put that Dutch detective on his track and get him out of the way. I will not do anything until I hear from you, but in the meantime I would remind you that he is your man, that I had little or nothing to do with his being engaged, and last, that if anything goes wrong and he is concerned, I will not take any responsibility.

Mr Blenkiron pulled the sheet of paper out of the machine and read what he had written, and, as he finished it, a slow smile dawned about the corners of his mouth and lingered there. He went through the process of folding the letter, putting it in an envelope and writing a name and address on it, before the smile faded. He stuck down the flap of the envelope and slipped it into his pocket.

Then, attracted by sounds below, he went to the window and saw a procession of men coming up the drive to the front door. They walked in twos and threes, each carrying a bundle or a small suitcase. They were big men, dressed in nondescript, slightly foreign-looking clothes, and there were fourteen of them.

Van Loon's gamekeepers had arrived.

MR BLENKIRON smiled again, this time with ordinary satisfaction, and went down-stairs.

David met him in the hall.

The young man's eyes, no longer dazed,

were bright with knowledge which the sight of Mr. Blenkiron's cheek substantiated. The marks on it could not be taken for anything but what they were, and instantly he was aware of a savage satisfaction in his heart. He understood why the girl had been running, why she had struck him so furiously when he had kissed her. She had been angry, and frightened by what had happened immediately before—a similar experience at the hands of Mr. Blenkiron. In such a mood she would have treated any one as she had treated him; it was natural if unfortunate, for David would have given his soul to have been able to wipe out the events of the last few minutes.

He faced Mr. Blenkiron squarely resisting a desire to seize him by the throat and bang his square bullet head against the wall. The time would come, he told himself, and this new score against the man became merely another reason to go softly. Besides, the porch and hall were full of Dutchmen who stared curiously about them and listened to Van Loon's instructions to the housekeeper as to where they were to be quartered. The housekeeper was mystified but phlegmatic.

Then David noticed that Mr. Blenkiron's eyes were fixed on his cheek, and that he was on the point of smiling at what he saw. Mr. Blenkiron saw and understood, even as David had seen and understood. It put them on the same level, save that David did not want to smile.

Mr. Blenkiron mastered his mirth and drew the letter from his pocket.

"Take this into the village and post it—better register and express it, too. And you stick to your job, *David Shaw Gould*," he said.

David nodded, and took the letter, angrier than he had ever been in his life, not because of Blenkiron's direct reminder, by using his full name, that he still held the scepter of power, but because of his impudent interference in a matter which did not concern him. Ann was Ann, and in the young man's state of mind he could have battered the life out of the man who had insulted her, with the greatest good-will in the world. But he had not the blind chivalry of a medieval gallant, who would doubtless have proceeded to rend Mr. Blenkiron limb from limb, thereby displaying a deplorable lack of discretion.

David, perhaps on the whole more valorous, turned, and walking through the throng of Van Loon's compatriots into the open air, set off down the drive toward the post-office at Sommerford Keys.

He had not yet seen Ann to make his peace with her, if peace she would have. The unfortunate affair still separated them, and although the thought of moving even temporarily from her side was abhorrent, he was glad to be alone, out of the house and away from the scene of the adventure.

He had yet another problem with which to deal, and no small one it seemed to him. She would not forgive him at once; he was certain of that. He was even doubtful if she would forgive him at all. She would think of him now as she thought of Blenkiron, as an unpleasant creature to be avoided; some one who had disappointed her, some one who had tacitly promised her friendship and affection and then failed to keep faith.

David cursed himself for an impulsive, blundering fool. He lacked the intelligence to apply the instinct he had won from experience. A little while ago he had congratulated himself, that now, that the real love of his life had come it had not found him unprepared since he had learned a little of the ways of women during the last four or five years. And so far things had worked miraculously on his side. Fate and the world of affairs had joined forces in throwing her with him and making her dependent upon him for moral and even physical support. But he must needs hurry the natural process of events by a piece of stupid emotionalism, destroying the careful work of circumstance.

In spite of these self-reproaches, however, he found time to study further the topography of the immediate neighborhood. He followed a path at the end of the wood which brought him to a foot-bridge across the stream and half a mile farther on a narrow road leading into Sommerford Keys. The ground for the most part was broken by hedges dividing fields; the Mill House wood being the only one in sight of the whole way.

THE village itself was typical of the countryside; old, sleepy, and picturesque with the walls of the cottages gray with lichen and the dust of passing motor cars. The post-office, a spare counter in a general shop, was deserted, and

David despached the letter, registering and expressing it according to Mr. Blenkiron's instructions. He made a careful note of the name and address. It ran: ***William Fox, Esq., 115 Greystone Chambers, Greystone Square, London***, and he decided that William Fox would be the name of Mr. Blenkiron's eccentric partner, and Greystone Chambers the flat in which he interviewed the world from behind a curtain. He put the registration receipt in his wallet.

It was a quarter to one by the clock in the shop when he went out, and the gentle heat of midsummer was upon the village. He walked through the soft dust toward the lane he had come by, and passed the single inn; an Elizabethan building with thatched porch and roof.

As he came abreast of it he was hailed by a shepherd who crouched in solitary state over a tankard of beer at the wooden table by the door. He was a venerable old man with shaggy gray beard and whiskers, and the voice in which he called out was wheezy with age, so wheezy indeed, that David, who had been taught that politeness toward the old was a virtue in youth, had to approach the table to hear what the ancient one wanted.

"Good marning! Good marning! Good marning!" said the shepherd heartily, and adjusted a pair of crotchety spectacles on his weather-bronzed nose, "I see that they've gottun a foine set o' men down yonder at the mill. I see'd un come, Oi did, in a motor-lorry, begum. Fourteen of um, half-an-hour agone. Mud they be a-goin' to cut down the wood?"

"Er-no. They're gamekeepers," said David, and began to edge away. "Good morning" he added as a sop to his training.

"Wut a hurry the young be allus in," remarked the old man testily. "Sit you down an' take a pint, me lad. 'Tis good beer."

"I'm sure—"

"Percy doesn't give you beer for lunch," interrupted the shepherd in the cheerful voice of Mr. Zack. "Sit down and order a pint."

David sat down because surprise prevented him from doing anything else. The shepherd from Rhodesia produced a huge red cotton handkerchief and loudly but leisurely blew his nose, apparently in order to allow David to recover. Then he hammered on the table with his long stick and ordered beer, another two pints, from the young lady who put her head round the corner of the porch. By the time she had served them and the shepherd's health had been drunk, David was capable of intelligent comprehension.

"I was a frank admirer of yours at breakfast this morning, Mr. Zack," he said. "But at lunch time you find me an ardent disciple. How the devil do you do it?"

"Practise and necessity," said the little man. "Did Percy slaughter my inscription stone?"

"Nearly, but he refrained. He was furiously angry but quite unsuspicious. Van Loon has been scratching all the morning."

Mr. Zack nodded approvingly, and then said tentatively:

"Any more experiment, yet?"

David took a drink of beer.

"I may not be a friend of Blenkiron's, but I am still his bottle-washer," he said. "You mustn't ask me questions about my work."

Mr. Zack glanced at him quickly.

"You're a queer chap, but I'm damned if I don't like that sort of queerness. It's unusual in these days. I'm better pleased at meeting an example of it than I would be if you handed me a cheque for half a million. Much better pleased. I've knocked about the world a devil of a lot and I've seen a few men, one way and another, but you're unique. I'm proud to know you."

David remained modestly silent, and Mr. Zack continued earnestly.

"I'm pretty sure, too, that I owe you my life, and I can assure you that I value that possession highly. I am in your debt, and being an independent sort of chap I normally dislike being in debt, but somehow I don't mind where you are concerned. You're the first creditor I've ever had a liking for."

David must have looked a little uncomfortable, for Mr. Zack changed the subject after reminding him that if ever he wanted anything he must promise to ask for it.

"I shall be here indefinitely," he finished up. "Rope me if things get too hot for you and the young lady. My name in case you need it is Giles. I have come from Petersfield on a matter of sheep, about which, thank the Lord, I am an authority. The people round here seem to think of nothing else."

"Thanks," said David and rose. "I won't forget. Now I must be getting along. Lunch is at half-past one."

"I wish you could lunch with me, but of course you can't. By the way, have you ever seen William Fox?"

"Never."

"Neither have I—nor for that matter, has anybody else I know. I can't for the life of me find out who the man is. His flat has been watched for nearly a fortnight but he hasn't stirred out of it. My people are puzzled. It's not important now, but later it may be. S'long. Drop in any time you feel like a chat."

DAVID left the shepherd to his beer and hurried on his way, with the thought of Mr. Zack's presence in the forefront of his mind. It was a comforting thought, since the Rhodesian impressed him still more as one to be trusted for all that he sat on the other side of the fence, and since both sides of it were probably wrong sides, the morality of his dealings with Mr. Zack in relation to his duty toward Mr. Blenkiron could not be questioned. So long as he did not deliberately act against the man whose money he took, it could not matter if he occasionally drank a pint of beer with a friend, even if that friend happened to be one of his employer's many enemies.

Mr. Zack was an ally in the opposing camp, a thing not unprecedented in the history of intrigue, and David was grateful to circumstances for having brought it about.

He returned to the Mill House with a feeling that the storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. As yet, however, they were too far away from him to determine when and where they would break. The air of the adventure was growing oppressive with the promise of trouble, and he was aware of the response in himself to the phenomenon.

Lunch was another silent meal, and only at the end did anybody show any disposition toward conversation. To have to look down on the party from some external point of view, would have given one an entirely false impression of the purposes with which it was individually concerned. Mr. Blenkiron might have been a harmless profiteer in tinned salmon; the professor a teacher of divinity at a girl's school; Van Loon a politician, and David a youth without a care in the world.

Only Ann would have appeared to be what she was, a girl who had seen something of life and found it a little unpleasant. She devoted herself to the meal, although she ate little, and paid no attention to her table-companions.

Actually Ann was wondering when she would get a chance of seeing David alone, which was exactly what he was wondering himself. She saw that he had hardened his outward attitude and that it might mean anything as far as she was concerned. He might be hating her or loving her, understanding her or relegating her into the semi-forgetfulness of indifference, it might be that.

She was a little angry with him but she was much angrier at herself. She had had leisure to forgive him for kissing her but she had not had time to condone his lack of artistry. Also she had had time neither to forgive nor condone her own hastiness in slapping his face and lack of balance in believing his motives similar to those of Mr. Blenkiron.

At any rate, she wanted to tell him that she had forgiven him but that he must not let it happen again.

As for Mr. Blenkiron, his case was simple and she gave it little thought. She certainly would never forgive him and without bothering to mention it she would personally see to it that it did not occur a second time. If she had known that David had guessed what had happened in that direction, she would have been more disturbed.

The meal dragged through to its end. Mr. Blenkiron who had spent most of it in assuring his amorous spirit that he would soon settle Miss Brunton's hash when he got her alone, arranged the program for the afternoon to that end.

In the room overlooking the drive which was used as a study Ann Brunton stood with her back to the window and stared at Mr. Blenkiron with horrified eyes. The full light of the afternoon sun shone on the dull red of his face and his white eyes, for once wide open, were glimmering evilly. His voice came thickly.

"Because you're my secretary," he said, "does that give you the right to read my private letters?"

"It was on the pad on your desk," she returned hotly. "I went to it to fetch the letters you signed this morning. How could I help seeing it? I read it because I thought you wanted it typed. You often write your letters by hand first."

"And you understand it, of course?"

She was frightened, for she had never seen his eyes before, and her first instinct was to deny that she knew what Mr. Blenkiron proposed to do. Then her indignation with him triumphed, and she said:

"It is simple enough, and what one would expect. It's a pretty dastardly game. Mr. Fox put up the money and Mr. Fox has been taking the risks, or most of them."

He was watching her grimly.

"So—you know, eh? Then you're dangerous. But I am dangerous, too. Have you forgotten that?"

"I have not forgotten that I did not murder Reuben Lipsheimer, if that's what you mean. You have no hold over me." Ann's voice was firmer than her heart. It seemed a moment to bring forth all her resources for her own protection. She saw that she had shocked him. His eyes opened a little wider.

"You have made good progress, my dear Miss Brunton. I wonder what else you know?"

"More than enough to spoil your game," she admitted, and realized how far she was from the door.

"And this morning you struck me," he went on. "You little fool! Do you think you can play with me like this? That you can criticize my plans? When a man becomes dangerous, I kill him, but you are a woman, and I do not, as a rule, kill women. But you have most decidedly got to be kept quiet. First you adopt a high and mighty independence, then you muddle yourself up with my affairs. You damned little fool."

He sprang suddenly and swiftly for a man of his ungainly size, and before she had cried out the first syllable of a name his left hand was pressed against her mouth, stifling the rest. The vague sound reached no farther than the closed door.

Then he had her head under his left arm, and still keeping his hand over her mouth dragged her toward a bookcase against the wall. He reached it, and with his right hand pressed the side of it. It immediately swung inward on a central pivot so that the other side came out at right angles to the wall and disclosed a dark, cave-like hole.

He took an electric torch from a shelf in the back of this amazing bookcase and, switching it on, disappeared with the girl into the darkness of the recess. The moment he had gone the bookcase moved silently back into position. No sound reached the room which was quiet save for the gentle ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece, emphasizing the tranquillity of the afternoon. The scene of violence which had just taken place seemed far removed from reality.

Perhaps five minutes later the bookcase swung open again, and Mr. Blenkiron stepped into the room—alone. He looked about him quickly, for there had been no time to lock the door against possible intruders, and closed the secret panel. Then, brushing green mildew from the arms and shoulders of his jacket—his very check jacket—he went to the desk and picked up the letter he had so carelessly left about. It consisted of few words, but it was full of strange information. He read it through. It ran:

> DEAR MABEL—In a week I shall be with you—rich and ready for a good time. Things are going splendidly and I have found a way of putting Fox off the scent when his diamonds disappear. I feel at the top of my form in this business. Shall we work Monte Carlo when this is finished off?
>
> Lovingly, W. B.

Mr. Blenkiron lit a match and holding this cheerful document by the corner, burned it. He had made a mistake in ever having committed to writing a hint of his plan to swindle his partner. It had been a foolish thing to do, and of no real necessity. Mabel was not expecting any word from him. He ground the ashes into the carpet with his foot. It was lucky he had been able to deal with a possible leak so easily.

He chose a volume of detective stories from the bookcase, settled himself comfortably in an armchair, and began to read. The red of his face was less purple, and his eyes were once more hidden by their cushions of flesh.

When the clock struck three he put down the book, and unlocking a drawer in the desk, took from it a long-barreled automatic pistol and four charged clips for its magazine. He put the pistol in his right hip-pocket, the spare clips in the outside pocket of his coat, and relocked the drawer.

Then, having leisurely lighted a cigar, he proceeded without hurry to the laboratory.

VII

DAVID was the only one of the three men in the laboratory who looked up when Mr. Blenkiron came in. He had been listening for Ann's coming with more attention than he had paid the professor and Van Loon at their work. He could not rid his mind of the uneasiness he had felt when Mr. Blenkiron escorted her up-stairs after lunch. The man's conceit had been hurt, and she had probably had an unpleasant hour with him.

He was more disappointed than alarmed when he perceived that Mr. Blenkiron was alone. The financier rolled his cigar into the corner of his mouth, and said easily:

"Well, gentlemen. Are we all ready? Miss Brunton has had to take an important letter to Sommerford Keys which I forgot this morning, so I'm afraid she will miss the interesting experiments we are about to witness."

David turned to the bench to hide the expression on his face. Blenkiron had been quick to seize an excuse to vent his annoyance on her; there were times when he behaved like a boy of ten.

Thus did the young man, following a racial characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon, underrate his enemy.

"Is the carbon ready?" the professor asked Van Loon, and the Dutchman grunted assent.

"One way of obtaining pure carbon is by burning sugar," announced the professor. His bad temper seemed to have been forgotten in approaching a critical moment in his work. Mr. Blenkiron perched himself on the edge of the bench by the side of the rays machine. He tapped its mahogany and vulcanite body.

"Fifty thousand pounds' worth of radium here," he said. "You are an expensive workman, professor."

"Don't meddle with it, then," remarked Massaroon. "Give me that carbon, Van Loon."

They bent together, over the retort from which the upper half had been removed. The professor took a number of iron cubes from the bench and arranged them neatly at the bottom, and on top of these he placed perhaps a dozen lumps of carbon. Then, with the aid of Van Loon, he lifted the heavy cover of the furnace into place and screwed it down by means of a clamp operated by a stout lever at the top.

"Air-tight, heat-tight, solid!" said the professor and paused to light a cigaret from the stub between his lips. Mr. Blenkiron watched the proceedings with what appeared to David to be an unnatural lack of interest. He drew at his cigar and from time to time contemplated the pattern of the smoke which he blew toward the ceiling. It was indicative in his pride in himself that he should view an important crisis in his fortunes with unconcern.

The professor turned his attention to the tubes and cables connecting the retort with the rays plant, and then to the plant itself. David strolled to the closed windows and looked down. Three gamekeepers from Amsterdam patrolled the narrow path below, and two more were visible in the wood beyond. He tried to catch a glimpse of the drive down which Ann would presently return, but it was hidden behind the trees.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sudden splutter of the small petrol engine on the floor below the bench, and the professor urged him to go and sit somewhere else. The experiment was about to begin.

DAVID was called upon to watch the oil gauge and generally supervise the activities of the engine. Van Loon stationed himself by the retort after adjusting a screw on the dynamo, which sang tunefully but monotonously. The professor moved a switch on the control board of the rays plant and stood watching it with the strained air of one waiting for something to happen. Mr. Blenkiron dropped the end of his cigar on the floor, put his foot on it and moved up to the professor's side.

"All well?" he asked.

The professor nodded, and glanced at the retort. After a moment he stepped across to it and put his hand on it. He nodded again.

"She's just warm. There are seven thousand degrees of heat inside now; about twice as much as man has ever succeeded in getting before." He tested the adjusting bar of the clamp before returning to the other end of the bench.

David looked respectfully at the retort. Seven thousand degrees. He remembered that iron melted at about one thousand five hundred. The contents of the furnace must be in a curious state, and the thought that a couple of inches of dull blue metal was all that confined such enormous heat was awe-inspiring. The professor's nonchalance was superb, and his regular, unemotional puffing at his eternal cigaret was no swifter than usual.

"Jove!" said David softly.

"Ten thousand" observed the professor, and moved another switch. "We have to turn it on slowly."

Slowly!

Van Loon's face was grayish in color and he fidgeted nervously with his long fingers. The thing was affecting him. Mr. Blenkiron was less nervous, but he mopped his face suddenly, and took another cigar from his case. He made an effort to light it, but rolled it between his teeth and lips until the end became pulpy and broke off in his mouth.

David did not analyze his own emotions although he observed those of the others. He was still wondering when Ann would come. A few minutes of silence passed after the professor's last words, and then David turned to his employer, who was staring at the retort.

"What time did Miss Brunton go out?" he asked casually, and was puzzled by the start which Mr. Blenkiron gave.

"Er—about a quarter to three," he said, returning to his watching the pot in which his diamonds boiled.

David regarded him thoughtfully and glanced at the clock on the wall. It was three forty-five. She ought to be back within a few minutes. Certainly before four o'clock.

"Thirteen thousand degrees," remarked the professor, and the silence returned, broken only by the soft "put-put" of the engine—the exhaust was carried by a pipe through the wall to the open air—and the singing of the dynamo.

Mr. Blenkiron bit another piece off the end of his cigar, and mopped his face again. Van Loon ran a bony forefinger round the inside of his collar, and David realized that the air was warmer than it had been.

Suddenly the Dutchman looked at the retort, and said harshly:

"It's getting hot!"

"Of course it's getting hot" returned the professor. "What d'you suppose it will do? Grow icicles?"

"It's hotter than it vas the first time," persisted Van Loon without taking his eyes from it.

The professor left the rays machine and moved closer to the retort and peered at it. Then he stroked his face and nodded.

"Perhaps she is," he said, and made no effort to test the supposition with his hand.

"Does it matter?" asked Mr. Blenkiron.

"The graphite lining may have gone."

"Does it matter?" Mr. Blenkiron's voice was a little high-pitched.

"But I rather thought it would. The question is whether the Massaroonium will hold out."

"Massaroonium?"

"Yes. The new metal. My metal."

"Don't you *know* whether it will hold out?"

The professor turned irritably.

"No! How should I?"

"Good God!" said Mr. Blenkiron. "You invented it!" And his eyes suddenly appeared glimmering.

There was yet another period of silence which was again broken by Van Loon.

"It is red hot!" he exclaimed. "And the tubes! Look!"

The steel plates on which the tubes from the rays machine rested were a dull red, and the blue of the retort itself had turned a bright pink at the bottom.

The professor went leisurely back to the rays machine and regarded the control board thoughtfully while the others watched him anxiously. Mr. Blenkiron took two steps forward and halted, staring first at the little figure of the professor, and then at the retort. It seemed to be imbued with a malignant spirit of wickedness which was rendered all the more alarming by its passivity and impersonality.

"What's the matter?" he asked with something akin to fear in his voice.

"Hm-m," murmured the professor. "The indicator has dropped to zero. I was afraid it would."

"What do you mean, curse you? For God's sake, tell me what has happened?"

The professor moved another switch with a tentative gesture, and frowned.

"I'm afraid, I don't quite know what degree of heat we have reached," he said. "The register has failed to record it. I think we'd better be content with what we have got."

"Stop the damned thing!" snapped Mr. Blenkiron.

"Hm-m" remarked the professor again. He moved the switches back to their original positions and stopped the engine and the dynamo, leaving the room silent save for the quick breathing of its occupants and a vague humming sound which emanated from the retort. The room had become stiflingly hot, and David, obeying a sign from Mr. Blenkiron, opened three of the four windows.

"How long will it take to cool?" demanded the financier, and with a return of courage he approached the furnace. The bright pink had spread until the whole surface was uniform in this unpleasant color. It was far more dangerous looking than any mere steel at white heat could be. Little particles of dust brightened into instant flame as they came in contact with the surface. The heat at a distance of six feet from it was too intense to be borne, and the opening of the windows did little to improve the atmosphere of the room. No breeze penetrated the wood, and the hot summer air, which was cold in comparison with the air in the room, drifted in only lazily.

DAVID looked at the clock and frowned. It was four-fifteen. Ann should have been back twenty minutes ago. Then he remembered Mr. Zack. Perhaps he had seen her and insisted on her taking a lemonade with him. But, on the other hand, she had known that the experiment was to take place, and she had probably excused herself and hurried back.

Suddenly interrupting his speculations came the voice of Van Loon, whose horror of the retort's condition had prevented him from taking his eyes off it.

"It melts," he shouted. "Professor! It melts. Vat do ve do?"

It was true. The furnace had begun to melt at the bottom so that the whole affair began to list drunkenly on one side. It was crumbling up and a great cloud of black acrid smoke burst from the bench where it stood. The heavy plates on which it had rested had melted under it like so much lead foil.

The next moment there was an explosive crash as the retort dropped like a stone through the bench to the floor, where it was visible for a moment before it sank out of sight, leaving a charred and smoldering hole in the boards.

The professor rushed to the place and stamped on a creeping flame that licked the leg of the bench. Then he seized a chair and whirling it above his head brought it down on the rays machine with tremendous force for so small a man.

"It's got out of hand!" he shouted. "It's got out of hand!"

The chair broke into its several parts under the strain of a second blow and he threw aside what remained of it, caught up a four-foot iron bar from the corner and finished his work of destruction until he reached the center of the machine. Then he dropped the bar and delved in the ruins for a moment and finally picked out a small tube which he put in his pocket.

This amazing incident affected the three other men in various ways. Mr. Blenkiron danced up and down with feverish profanity pouring from his lips while Van Loon, almost weeping with fear and excitement, banged out the last flames which the retort had left behind, with a piece of flat wood. David on the other hand, saw possible danger in the connecting tubes, and using a pair of heavy pliers carried them to the window and dropped them out.

This done, he turned and ran out of the door in pursuit of the retort, which must eventually come to rest somewhere, since there was but a limited number of unresisting floors and ceilings it could burn in its way through. Sooner or later it would reach the earth.

The professor ran at his heels carrying a large vacuum flask.

"Liquid air!" he said. The coldest thing in the world. We'll catch it somewhere but I hope to God the thing doesn't burn the house down first. Thousands of degrees. Blenkiron! Blenkiron!" He turned his head and shouted. "Are there cellars below the laboratory?"

"Two floors down," came the financier's voice. "Come on, Van Loon. You've put it out."

David and the professor had to wait for Mr. Blenkiron, whose speed was not great, at the door of the sitting-room. A large hole had been burned through the golden ceiling and a corresponding one in the floor marked the retort's exit in the course of its downward journey. Luckily there was no sign of flames although there were heavy coils of smoke hanging in the middle of the room.

Blenkiron now led the way, for he knew the topography of the house below the ground.

"It can't go far," he said breathlessly. "All the floors down here are concrete built."

Concrete!" snarled the professor contemptuously in a tone which implied that butter would be about as effective in resisting the heat of his retort. In spite of the unforeseen and apparently disastrous conclusion to the experiment he was still proud of the heat he had attained.

"Well, it can't burn, that's one mercy," returned the financier, whose equilibrium was not a little disturbed.

"That's all you know," snapped the professor, stumbling down yet another flight of stairs with the vacuum flask hugged tight to his velvet coat.

They found the retort, or to be more exact, the top of the shaft it had made for itself through a foot of concrete and a couple of yards of mother earth. In the middle of a great, empty cellar was the hole, and from the bottom a lurid beam of red light pierced the cavernous gloom like a searchlight.

They stood round it, staring down at the glowing mass which still sank, if more slowly, while the professor carefully unscrewed the top of the vacuum flask.

"Get back," he said. "There's going to be a little steam."

Then he lay down flat so that he could just reach the mouth of the shaft with his outstretched hand and circumspectly poured about a tablespoonful of the liquid air down it. Instantly there was a sharp explosion and a cloud of steam shot up, blotting out the light for a moment.

"I don't want to give her too much at once," the professor explained. "Or I shall smash her up altogether. As it is she'll split and crack a good deal." And he poured a little more of the flask's contents down the hole. The steam rose sharply as before.

"I suppose you want to preserve the damned thing as a memento of your stupidity sneered Mr. Blenkiron from a vantage point out of reach of the steam.

The professor twisted his head.

"I suppose you're a fool, Blenkiron. Can't you understand that there's a lump of molten iron somewhere down there with about a pound of carbon in it in the process of crystalizing into God knows how many diamonds? If you'd use your wits you'd be raking up every spade and pickax in the place to get it out instead of standing there criticizing the methods of somebody who knows what he's about!" And the professor spilled a pint of liquid air down the shaft by way of a full stop. A corresponding explosion took place.

DAVID and Van Loon were given the task of enrolling gamekeepers as miners, and ten minutes later there were six lusty Dutchmen at work in the cellar by the light of candles. They excavated quickly under the guidance of Van Loon, who in turn was goaded by the professor and Mr. Blenkiron. The heat of the retort was still considerable rendering the task of getting down to it no small one. But the Dutchmen were hard, and three of them had worked as ships' stokers in the course of their varied careers.

David seized the opportunity created by the confusion to slip away in search of Ann, for he had seen nothing of her when he was above ground with Van Loon looking for excavating implements and gamekeepers.

He went straight to her room. It was empty and a brown hat lay on the bed. She had either returned or gone out without a hat. But further thought showed him that he could not be sure. He hurried down-stairs to the room above the dining-room, which he knew to be the study in which she worked with Mr. Blenkiron. She was not there. The portable typewriter lay open on the table as she must have left it and the room gave him no feeling of being otherwise but in order.

He walked to the window and observed that it loooked out upon the drive. The fifty yards or so that were visible were deserted, and he went quickly down-stairs and out of the front door. The two Dutchmen were leaning against the stone pillars of the porch. He asked them if they had seen her but failed to make them understand.

For a moment he stood and considered. It would take him twenty minutes to get to the village and back if he ran both ways. Blenkiron was in the cellar and six feet deep in the cellar were his diamonds, at least he hoped they were; and so long as the matter remained in doubt he would behave like a terrier at a rat-hole. He would not leave it.

David pursed his lips and set off down the drive at a steady jog-trot. Mr. Blenkiron could whistle for him if he needed him before he had discovered where Ann was.

Ten minutes later he was facing the shepherd from Rhodesia across the table in front of the inn.

"Have you seen Miss Brunton?" he asked.

Mr. Zack shook his be-whiskered head.

"No. Sit down and have a beer. It's a beastly hot afternoon."

"Damn your beer!" said David. "How long have you been here?"

"Since you left me before lunch. I ate my bread and cheese here and I smoked my clay pipe after it. I'm sorry you feel like that about the beer. Personally, I—"

"And Miss Brunton has not passed on her way to the post-office? It would have been about three o'clock. She was posting a letter for Mr. Blenkiron."

Mr. Zack considered for a moment.

"How do you know?"

"How do I know? Blenkiron told me he had sent her."

Mr. Zack nodded.

"And of course that proves it? Percy is the soul of honor. He wouldn't tell a lie. Now if you'd see the point of drinking a—"

"My hat!" David stood up.

"What an impulsive youth you are," murmured Mr. Zack. "Compose yourself, and explain."

"That devil is up to some accursed game!" David said quickly. He remembered the start Mr. Blenkiron had given when he had asked him where the girl was. "Something's happened," he added.

"It wouldn't surprise me," said Mr. Zack. "Something usually does when Percy is around. By the way, are you armed?"

"Armed? I've got a life-preserver in my suitcase."

"Life-preserver!" said the shepherd in tones of scorn. "Here—take this."

"This!" was an automatic pistol with one of the longest barrels David had ever seen or rather felt, for Mr. Zack thrust it into his hand under cover of the table.

"It's a design of my own. Aim dead on your target at anything up to a hundred and fifty yards. Its farthest killing range is eight hundred. Three feet above at that distance puts you on your mark."

David's eyes were bright as he slid such a satisfactory lethal weapon into the side pocket of his sport coat.

"And some cartridges," continued Mr. Zack, passing him a small but heavy packet in the same way.

"But you—?"

"I've got another one up-stairs. I always travel with two. Take it, my boy, and by God! use it if Percy gets going on anything dirty! I'll tell you this. If he said your young lady went to the village you can bet your last sixpence she didn't. I'm here to watch everything that goes on from this side of the Mill House until my people think out what they're going to do. And I haven't been asleep. She hasn't passed this way and she'd have to if she went into the village. If you ask me, she's got in bad with Percy over something and he's keeping her in the house somewhere. I know the way his mind works. When she doesn't show up he'll announce with horror and indignation that we've kidnapped her. He'll bewail his foolishness in sending her on an errand in which she couldn't be looked after. Try him. I'll bet you a million that that will be the line he'll take."

David's eyes were hard as he muttered his thanks. He turned and set out for the Mill House.

The Rhodesian watched him go with an expression of affection in his bright, birdlike face which was so effectively hidden by his shepherd's whiskers. David was a youth after his own heart. He had got down to the thing without an unnecessary word.

DAVID reached the front door in time to see Mr. Blenkiron put something behind a chair in the hall, turn and waddle up the stairs. Sounds above told that the excavation in the cellar had been concluded and the scene once more shifted to the laboratory. Mr. Blenkiron had not seen him, for he had instinctively checked himself in the porch the moment he had seen the financier's furtive movements.

As the fat legs of his employer disappeared at the top of the stairs he went quickly to the chair. Behind it was a small suitcase, and without scruple he opened it to find that it contained clothes—clothes such as a man would carry who proposed to travel light. David shut the case, put it back, and frowning, thoughtfully, went up the stairs to the laboratory.

Why should Mr. Blenkiron anticipate a journey?

David entered the laboratory with the conviction that the storm cloud was well over the edge of the horizon and would break upon them all in a very short time indeed. As to Mr. Blenkiron, his suitcase and his furtive air when he carried it, there was nothing to decide. But whatever lay behind it, and it certainly looked like a secret journey, that cheerful soul would not leave the Mill House without footing the bills which included among its several items the important one of Ann Brunton's disappearance. He had her hidden somewhere, and David smiled grimly if inwardly at the man's stupidity in expecting him to sit down quietly and unquestioningly under such a condition.

The same group: the financier, the professor, and Van Loon, were gathered about a deep porcelain basin on a table by an open window. Clouds of heavy, reddish brown gas rose from the contents of the basin and drifted lazily through the window. An acrid, nauseous smell permeated the long room, and David coughed as it reached his lungs. Mr. Blenkiron turned sharply.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

David's voice was too quiet for genuine tranquillity when he said:

"I have been looking for Miss Brunton. She has not come back."

He watched Mr. Blenkiron narrowly. The financier glanced up at the clock and frowned with an odd air of deliberation, like an actor at his opening words.

"That's funny," he said. "Five-thirty. She must have gone off for a walk or something—unless— By Heaven! I hope they haven't got her!"

"'They?'" asked David giving him the lead for which he was waiting.

"Yes. Roberts and his crowd. I should have thought of it. Excessively careless of me to let a girl, a helpless girl, go alone outside the grounds. We must look into this at once!" He turned to the professor, who was stirring something at the bottom of the basin with a glass rod. "D'you hear that, Massaroon? Miss Brunton has disappeared. I wouldn't have had this happen for a thousand pounds. We'll get the Dutchmen on to this. Van Loon, can you make them understand what has happened? Institute a search at once."

The Dutchman made no comment, but after peering into the basin, went to the window and leaning out, blew shrilly between his fingers. David watched the proceedings with interest, but more particularly did he watch Mr. Blenkiron. The man's eyes were on the professor's work almost the whole time, and his tones, as he followed the policy predicted by Mr. Zack, were too transparently honest to be convincing.

As Van Loon began to address a congregation of gamekeepers in rapid staccato Dutch, David slid his hand down and gripped the butt of the automatic pistol Mr. Zack had given him. His index finger felt for the trigger and he fixed Mr. Blenkiron with a cold stare. Then, as he opened his mouth to say "Where is she, you devil?" an interruption came. The professor remarked quickly:

"It's almost gone, Blenkiron, and there are several small pieces of sedimentation."

Instantly the financier stepped up to his side with both hands fluttering as though his fingers itched. David at once realized something which in his anger he had not had the perspicacity to understand. The basin contained the lump of iron they had retrieved from the wreck of the furnace, and the reddish-brown gas, which was now diminishing, was nitrogen dioxide, caused by the dissolving of the nitric acid bath in which that lump had been plunged. The experiment had reached its culminating point, and the "several small pieces of sedimentation" to which the professor alluded might be—diamonds.

Van Loon also understood the significance of the remark, for he finished giving his audience its instructions and came quickly back to the basin.

Mr. Blenkiron and the Dutchman watched the operation in breathless silence, and, when the professor picked up the sieve, they accompanied him to the light of the window. David followed, noticing that Van Loon's face was covered with beads of perspiration.

In the middle of the slightly concave surface of the sieve were a number of dull translucent crystals; perhaps a dozen in all varying in size from that of a sparrow's egg downward.

The professor shook the sieve.

"There are your diamonds," he said, and his voice carried a mixture of triumph and contempt in its tone, like a small boy saying: "I *said* I could do it. Why couldn't you believe me in the first place?"

The silence of the last few minutes continued for three or four seconds. Mr. Blenkiron broke it, stretching forth his fat right hand, and gathering up the fruits of the professor's toil.

"Are they all right? They're good?" he asked, a little shrilly.

The professor tossed the sieve into the corner with a gesture of finality and went to the ruins of his rays machine.

Van Loon wiped the perspiration out of his eyes with the back of his claw-like hand.

"Let me see them," he said. "I will soon tell!"

Reluctantly, watchfully, Blenkiron poured the crystals into the other's cupped hands. Van Loon took a piece of paper from a drawer in the table and arranged them on it in two graduated rows. He then produced a jeweler's lense, fitted it into his eye-socket and examined the stones minutely, holding them up to the light one by one, turning them about and weighing them on his finger tips. Mr. Blenkiron was breathing heavily through his mouth, and his eyes were white slits between their thick lids.

The Dutchman made no comment until he had finished his examination. Then he slipped his lense into his pocket and said calmly:

"They are not good. They are all flawed, oh yes!"

"My God," cried the financier. "Not good?"

Van Loon shook his head. He seemed curiously undisturbed by the anti-climax of the result. Beside Mr. Blenkiron, who was quivering visibly with disappointment and chagrin, he was stoicism personified.

The financier stood quite still for a moment, scowling. Then, as his rage demanded instant expression he turned and sprang at the professor, seizing him by the lapels of his velvet jacket.

"Massaroon! You dirty thief! You've failed! Did you hear what he said? They're no good! They're flawed! Useless! Valueless! I've spent forty thousand pounds on your damned alchemy, and you've let us down. I—I could break your damned neck!"

In the meantime the Dutchman had walked to the door and opened it.

"Stupid foolishness! he said. "Nobody can *make* diamonds. I go for a walk."

The door slammed and the financier shook the professor like a large dog shaking a very small rat. The little man's spectacles dropped on the floor and his cigaret followed them.

"You swore you could do it!" raged Mr. Blenkiron. "You're a cheap ill-conditioned fraud. You've had forty thousand pounds' worth of radium, out of us—where is it? Eh? Where is it? Speak up, you little fool! Where is it?"

The professor struggled to insert a few words in the less chaotic moments of the financier's torrent of abuse, but it was not easy because his teeth were being banged together, and he could not breathe properly. Indeed, if David had not come up and pulled Mr. Blenkiron by the shoulder, he might never have spoken at all. As it was the financier dropped him suddenly and drove a fist into David's face.

"Mind your own business," he shouted, and the young man staggered back with a bleeding mouth, he slipped and fell, but as he rose his hand was once more grasping the pistol in his pocket. The professor was half-lying, half-sitting on the floor, clinging to the leg of the bench, and Mr. Blenkiron was striding up and down the laboratory in a blind fury. David wanted to shoot him out of hand but if he did, knowledge of Ann would die with him.

"They're all right," the professor now stuttered. "Of course they're all right. You're a blind fool, Blenkiron. I tell you they're all right. They *must* be good! I've worked it out. Why should that murdering, thieving Dutchman tell you they aren't? That's what I want to know."

Most of his speech was lost upon Mr. Blenkiron, but two words toward the end caught his ear. They were "thieving Dutchman" and they penetrated into his comparatively cool subconsciousness and set up an instant reaction.

"If—!" began Mr. Blenkiron, and then broke off. Struck by a sudden thought he hurried to the table at which the Dutchman had made his examination of the stones.

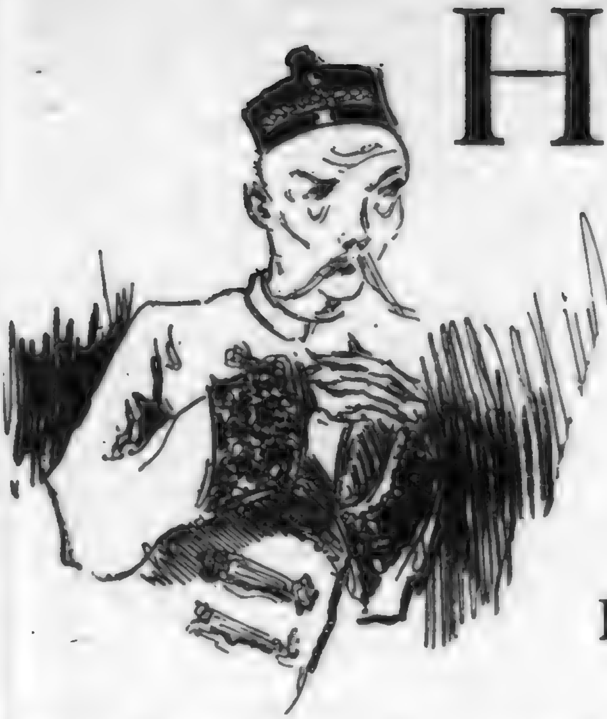
They, and the piece of paper so conveniently arranged for carrying them away, had gone.

And also, now that he came to see it, had Van Loon.

Mr. Blenkiron's evil white eyes opened very wide. He turned, and, without a word, bounded swiftly to the door.

It was locked!

To Be Continued



Hop Wo's African TURKEY

by

Robert Welles Ritchie

The Heathen Chinese Turns a Pretty Trick

WHEN Hop Wo, Silverbell's Oriental problem, bid in one adult, half-dressed lady ostrich at the sheriff's sale of land, buildings, appurtenances and ostriches belonging to Abinadab Smith, busted ostrich farmer, the cushion-eared God of Poisonous Luck started right in mixing bad medicine for him.

And none should have known better than Silverbell's sole yellow friend and brother that when this particular deity really extended himself he was the goin'est god in all the Kwang-tung heaven. Many a time and plenty when Hop Wo had burned enough punk sticks to pay Kiwanis dues for a year the object of his devotion would reach through the smoke and harpoon him. He was all calloused over from hard luck. But the Chinks like their gods rough.

Hop Wo had drifted out to the auction with no idea of buying an ostrich. He'd never been to Abinadab Smith's ranch before; never in his life had seen an ostrich nor knew that poor 'Dab had been flattened out in the ostrich-raising business when the he-dressmakers of Paris said women wouldn't wear plumes unless they were snake charmers in circuses. Hop just thought he might pick up some odds and ends for seven or ten cents—something he could turn into a can opener or a pair of ear-muffs and sell at a profit. He was great at that: picking up scraps and making something useful out of them. A great trader, Hop Wo. And close! If he ever had to decide whether to give up an eye or a ten-cent piece he'd juggled off a Papago Indian Silverbell's wash-worker would be half blind.

Well, Sheriff Bob hit sandy going after he'd raffled off the grandfather's clock, the lithograph of "Our Four-footed Friends" and other nicknacks from Abinadab's sitting-room. Because then he came down to the five ostriches which remained from the once flourishing flock Abinadab had been running on his place.

Arizona folks have simple tastes. They don't put on much dog. An ostrich is a luxury almost any of them can do without in a dry year when the price of cotton is so far down in the cellar you can't see it. It appeared those five large Plymouth Rocks were going to be hard to auction.

"What'm I offered for this prime African turkey?" Sheriff Bob pointed to the biggest of the birds corraled in a wire runway. "We paid a dollar a pound for turkey last Thanksgiving, an' here's nine hundred pounds of prime African turkey on the loose ready for the baking pan."

Sheriff Bob was as solemn as a church deacon at revival. A couple of the boys gave him the laugh he was expecting but no bid. Sheriff Bob's eye ran over the crowd and landed on the face of little Hop Wo under its floppy hat-brim. The sheriff plays a pretty shrewd game of poker; he can read poker faces. He read little Hop Wo's.

"Hop Wo, how come you don't get in on this whalin' big bargain? African turkey, Hoppy! Little pore an' pindlin' now maybe; but prime her up, an' come Thanksgiving you'll clean up on the turkey market of Coconino county."

"No can," grunted Hop Wo, but his squinched little eyes were shining with the old gamble light. Sheriff Bob tipped the wink to Henry Weathers, Silverbell's horse doctor and champion catcher of inside straights.

"Five dollars for that turkey," chirped Doc Weathers. Hop Wo swallowed the hook:

"Fi' dollah-hop!" He tilted the pot fifty cents, which for Hop Wo was a patch torn right out of the old heart.

"Five dollars, four bits for a bird the size of this!" Sheriff Bob looked as if he was going to burst into tears. "Why, Hoppy, you'll sell a couple links of that neck alone for five-and-a-half come Thanksgiving. Look at that laig. Figure the size of a fried chicken laig—of a reg'lar turkey laig alongside this one.

"Why, man, a whole family could eat off one drumstick of this African turkey for a week. *And* reg'lar turkey runs one dollar a pound."

"Six dollah," squeaked Hop Wo, not even waiting for Henry Weathers to tilt him. The little Chinaman saw the biggest gamble of his life slipping through his fingers. He knew that around Silverbell chickens and turkeys don't thrive—some say the grasshoppers are so savage they kill off the cocks. He knew that when Silverbell folks wanted to eat real poultry they had to pay freight on the sixty-mile haul from the railroad down at Aztec, which makes even a helping of dressing come high. Here were nine hundred pounds of turkey on the ground and Thanksgiving but a month off—

He came back at Doc Weathers' second boost with another fifty-cent heart strain. The vet. working smoothly with the sheriff in a criminal act hoisted Hop Wo up to the dizzy figure of $22.50. Then the hammer fell, and the ostrich belonged to him.

"You oughtn't have sawed off that whizzer on that Chink, Sheriff," Abinadab Smith moaned after Hop Wo had poured out the purchase price from his old buckskin bag. "That's the eatin'est bird of the lot—and the meanest."

"A Chink's got to have somethin' to occupy his mind, don't he? To keep him from dwelling on the fact he's a Chink and so ruining his intellect. Anyway," concluded Sheriff Bob, "that's probably the only one of your flock of orphans we'll sell."

He was right in that last thought, at least. Hop Wo had the "African turkey" market cornered. Though he did not know it, the other birds were shot later when no buyers volunteered to take them off the county's hands.

"It's going to be too bad," the mournful ostrich farmer sighed when he prepared to deliver Hop Wo's purchase to him. "A joke's a joke and I can enjoy one along with the next man. But what this bad bird'll do to that Chink is going to be mighty pitiful."

Hop Wo went into the corral with 'Dab Smith. The rest of the auction crowd gathered close outside the wire to form a first aid crew. 'Dab went up to Hop Wo's bird and gave a half-hitch with a piece of bale rope around her neck. He put the other end in the little Chink's hand.

"Her name's Evangeline," said Abinadab, "and she loves to have her head scratched—if you can reach it. I usually figure on reaching her head standing on a box outside the corral—outside, remember."

Little Hop looked up into Evangeline's eye—her good eye, one having been shut in a fight—and Evangeline looked down at him. She clopped her bill at him in a sort of warming-up exercise. Then Hop Wo started to croon Cantonese at her; it sounded like singing. Evangeline cocked her head on one side with a surprised air. Hop Wo kept right on purring his ideographs; just standing there motionless, his little old face—the face of a placid mud turtle—turned up to where that long neck branched out into a bill like a clam-shell shovel.

Down came Evangeline's head. She made a playful bite at the slack of Hop Wo's overalls in front. Hop Wo ran a skinny hand along the top of her head, scratching it gently. He had that bad bird won in two minutes.

It is five desert miles from Abinadab Smith's ranch to Hop Wo's wash-house in Silverbell. Evangeline and her new master stepped those five miles wide and lofty.

"HELL-BIRD!— Devil-chicken!— Thy father was a dragon and thy mother an outcast goose whom the slave women of Fatshan stoned from the river." Hop Wo paused to catch his breath and the full swing of his stock of metaphor.

"When thou wast in the egg the black devil of Fa'a Wu brooded over thee. He gave thee body of an outrageous ginger jar, the neck of a serpent and legs like masts of a pirate junk. Abominable African turkey, arise from where you sit!"

An unbiased stranger seeing the cause of Hop Wo's wrath could not but have felt sympathy for him, Chink or no Chink. For Evangeline, with her sturdy legs doubled under her, was couched in a brooding attitude in a hole or wallow of her own digging behind her master's wash-house. And she had lined and feathered—as it were—this nest of hers with intimate garments of Silverbell's gentlemen and ladies—what-nots taken from Hop Wo's wash-line while he slept. This on the very second morning of her occupancy of the new home.

One sweep of the eye carried full news of disaster to Hop Wo, coming out of his shack with the dawn to gather in materials for the day's ironing. The bedevilled African turkey had pulled the nails from the chicken wire compound her master had constructed for her alongside the barn where he stabled his nag and cart. She had waded through a picket fence and selected a nesting place as close to the master's door as she could conveniently dig. Plundering of the wash-line had been an obvious afterthought.

Hop Wo exhausted his stock of Cantonese cuss words and, a grim thought prompting, went for his ax. Returning armed, he stood before the still recumbent Evangeline, scanning the length of neck to choose a spot to swing on. At that critical instant Evangeline ducked her head with a gesture of deepest humility not unmingled with affection and slid it out over the nest of shirts and other things to be scratched.

By that single gesture the fatuous bird revealed the surprising richness of love which had been born in her heart that moment at the ostrich farm when Hop Wo stood by her side and crooned reassuring words. She, the tough ostrich, meanest in Abinadab Smith's flock, had surrendered her heart to Hop Wo without reservation.

It was not this maiden confession which stayed Hop Wo's ax; rather, his business sense prevailed over his rage. "Twenty-two-dollah-hop" was not to be destroyed in anger. Indeed not when Thanksgiving was less than a month away and what sprawled in the dust before him was nine hundred pounds of turkey at a "dollah-pound."

"When you do feel this sharp edge, oh insane African turkey, know that the blow has been delayed through no love. And laugh not when you behold me washing over again what you have soiled lest I forget my investment and strike you into small pieces."

He herded Evangeline back into her compound, nailed up the chicken wire with the heaviest staples he could find in his box of scraps. The love-sick bird, finding herself about to be separated from the object of her devotion, clopped mournfully with her bill. At almost the last hammer stroke she reached over the fence, removed Hop Wo's floppy old hat and straightway settled upon it in a brooding posture.

HOP WO discovered that the fattening of ostrich drumsticks and wishbone against a "dollah-pound" cutting of a financial melon come Thanksgiving was not an easy task. Evangeline had an appetite. She would eat branches of mesquite with the beans on; she would eat every kind of cactus except the extra thorny *cholla;* she would eat strips of abandoned auto tires and the labels off tin cans if they were gaudily lithographed. Each day he must hitch up his laundry wagon and go out into the desert—returning by the town dump—to fetch a meal for his investment.

All of which would have been irksome and, taken in conjunction with his wash business, would have crowded Hop Wo's normal fourteen hours of labor perhaps beyond his resistance had his faith in an ultimate clean-up not been renewed constantly by Silverbell's good folk. Sheriff Bob and Doc Weathers, Justice of the Peace

Teenty Skillet and several others developed the habit of dropping around behind Hop Wo's wash-shop and pointing out on Evangeline the cuts they were expecting to grace Thanksgiving tables.

"Keep an eye on them legs, Hoppy. I'm figuring on buying the whole of one 'cause my wife's relatives will be to dinner."

"Give her plenty of bran mash, Hop Wo, so's to loosen her up around the breast bone; that's my cut."

"Dragon-child—outrageous African turkey;"—thus Hop Wo to his Evangeline—"if you knew the knives that will cut your ridiculous body apart before another moon is withered you would not make those love-eyes at me. I, Hop Wo, will retain one single feather of you to burn before the Joss of Poisonous Luck that he may never again send me to nurse such a monster."

The love-eyes Hop Wo mentioned so direfully did not abate their beaming. Instead, each day added something to their devoted burning. Every time Hop Wo threw an armful of prickly pear or some succulent morsel from the town dump over the wire to Evangeline she would clop her bill ecstatically and thrust her head through the mesh to be scratched. She even sang her love in what was a cross between a gobble and a gurgle.

Through the operation of some complex perhaps peculiar to the ostrich kind her mounting love was accompanied by an increasing desire to nest. That first wallow she had built and decorated with Silverbell's lingerie was but a beginning. Every foot of the compound wherein Hop Wo had fenced her was haggled and scratched into a maze of wallows like tangent shell holes. She moved fretfully from one to another.

The yearning bird used for a nest-egg a pumpkin which her adored master carelessly had tossed her. She moved this vegetable from nest to nest and ceaselessly brooded over it—an expectant look mantling her one good eye the while—but the stork who brings little ostrich children must have been preoccupied.

Hop Wo noticed this thwarting of a commendable instinct and scoffed:

"Consider not offspring, daughter of a leprous he-dragon. A clean world has no place for more than one of your snake brood. Your poisonous children would soon be left orphans if born."

By which heartless sentiment you may get an index on Hop Wo's temper after a week of cactus chopping and garbage toting.

SILVERBELL'S relish of the joke which had begun with Sheriff Bob's beguiling Hop Wo into buying an African turkey did not diminish with passing days. Every time the wash-man was seen driving his wagon out to the cactus patch back of town some wit would shout into the barber shop, "Dinner time for Evangeline!" Justice of the Peace Teenty Skillet gravely presented a pair of worn-out leather boots to Hop Wo: "A little snack for Evangeline."

Sheriff Bob had the happiest thought. He posted in front of his office a "Schedule of Cuts" done with brush and shoe polish on a broad piece of wrapping paper: "Prime Neck Piece" — "Left Leg Tenderloin" — "Gizzard," etc. In brackets after each item jokers entered their names in competitive fashion. Hop Wo was taken to view this chart of the hypothetical partition of Evangeline and had it explained to him.

"Do you figure, Hoppy, there'll be enough of her to go round come Thanksgiving?" Sheriff Bob's question was freighted with anxiety. "You know it's up to you to set the price and some of the boys already have begun making a pool to buy in the best cuts in case you try to gouge us with too high a price."

"Plice, him dollah-pound," quoth Hop Wo with an air of finality.

"Ye-ah, but how many pounds of African turkey have you got?" Sheriff Bob insisted. "That's what's botherin' all the folks of Silverbell like I told you."

"You say nine hun'erd pound when I buy-um," Hop Wo replied with a canny squinch of his turtle eyes up at the sheriff.

"Well, that was only guesswork, Hoppy," the sheriff demurred. "We think you ought to weigh Evangeline so's we can tell how many homes has turkey dinner coming Thanksgiving. There's Teenty Skillet's hay scales—"

Hop Wo bent reluctantly to the official will of Coconino County. The sheriff gravely accompanied him to the wash-house to fetch Evangeline to the weighing. Idlers who had overheard the colloquy sped to pool hall and garage up and down Main Street to spread the word, that Silverbell might take time off to enjoy a holiday.

Evangeline was sitting—or setting should be permissible—on her pumpkin when her master and the stranger appeared before her wire bungalow. A deeper than customary air of concentration shone from her good eye. One might stretch a point and say the Madonna look was hers. She burbled in her neck and put her head through the meshes to be scratched.

Evangeline's tremendous preoccupation made the business of persuading her to take a walk up Main Street to the hay scales one requiring all of Hop Wo's delicacy. He had a rope about her neck, but it was difficult to induce the brooding bird to rise.

"Most beautiful African tukkey—almond blossom of all the bird kind"—Hop Wo's Cantonese blarney was unctuous—"the American gentlemen of Silverbell ask that you condescend to step upon the scales. Your beauty is beyond weighing, but the quality of your soul will cause a measurable disturbance of the balances."

Evangeline was beguiled out of her severely contemplative mood. She followed her master up to the front of Justice Teenty Skillet's hay and feed store. Half the town of Silverbell and all the dogs were there to applaud. Everybody but Hop Wo knew the Thanksgiving turkey joke; such a refinement of that joke as the weighing of what the little Chink conceived to be potential profits was all to the good.

Evangeline stepped upon the hay scales with dignity. She instantly attempted to squat on the platform, but Hop Wo angrily kicked at the bending hinges of her knees.

"Feathered ginger jar, where are your manners?"

Then crisis.

Of a sudden the African turkey completely lost her mind. Her wings flopped wildly. She kicked out to right and left with piston strokes of her muscular legs threatening the lives of those standing nearest. One more futile attempt she made to settle down on the scales platform, then with a frenzied lunge she strode through the crowd straight for the opened door of Teenty Skillet's feed store. A defiant wag of her tail plumes and she was gone.

Justice Skillet started for his invaded store but quailed at recollection of those flailing legs. He turned to Sheriff Bob as the rightful protector of a citizen's property.

"Don't you look at me thataway," the sheriff demurred. "I wasn't elected to fight no mad ostriches. Where's that Chink?"

In all the pushing and shoving before the feed store door it was several minutes before little Hop Wo could worm himself to the front of the press. Him Sheriff Bob seized upon with sure instinct of the practical joker whose joke has boomeranged.

"Go in and drag your ding-donged bird outa there!" he commanded. Hop Wo ducked under his arm and entered the store.

The curious at the door could see little, but they heard Hop Wo's voice purling and lilting in something which might have been a Chinese lullaby; this for many nerve-racking minutes of suspense. Then he reappeared with a grin like a slit in a withered apple spread across his features.

"Mo' bettah now," he said oracularly.

"'Mo' bettah' your grandmother!" growled Sheriff Bob. "Why don't you snake your bird outa there?"

"Him not finish yet," was Hop Wo's suave answer. "T'ink maybe-so him catchum fi'—six—, maybe dozen mo'."

"More what, man? Speak up!" Justice Teenty Skillet's impatience was waxing.

"Egg," clucked Hop Wo and ducked back to be with Evangeline in her dark hour.

IN PROPHESYING a dozen Hop Wo had underestimated Evangeline's potentialities for motherhood by one. When he had tenderly led her back to her lying-in retreat behind the wash-house Hop Wo returned to Justice Skillet's store with a wheelbarrow filled with hay. He trundled away thirteen eggs, each the size of a cocoanut.

Some blind instinct prompted Hop Wo to put those eggs on ice.

He went into his wash-house and burned thirteen punk sticks before his private Joss of Poisonous Luck. And then after the years of harrying and cat-dragging that joss had visited upon Hop Wo, in the inscrutable way characteristic of the gods of Kwangtung the deity moved in measures of recompense. He sent rain down on the Cabeza Prieta mountains. He sent rain down on those mountains two weeks on end without cease.

The Cabeza Prieta mountains are two hundred miles from Silverbell. They are not even in the same State. Then how, you ask, could the sending of rain on distant mountains be construed as a benefit to a wash-man, owner of an African turkey—and near-mother—in Silverbell?

Softly! Softly—

The Cabeza Prieta river flows between Silverbell and the railroad, a dry wash most months of the year but capable of becoming an unfordable torrent when the rains fall in distant mountains. The day after Evangeline so distinctly emphasized her capacity for motherhood in the feed store the Cabeza Prieta River was unfordable. It remained unfordable—for supply wagons from the railroad point, at least—for two weeks.

The last hen's egg in Silverbell was boiled the third day after the supply wagons found themselves balked by a torrent.

Day after that Sheriff Bob made a casual call on Hop Wo at his wash-house. He found the little Chink busy cutting prickly pear pads into convenient lengths for Evangeline to swallow.

"By the way," said the sheriff, "you didn't throw away those ostrich eggs your bird went and laid in Teenty Skillet's place?"

"Ost-lich—ost-lich?" Hop Wo repeated.

"Oh, I mean the African turkey," said Sheriff Bob with a deprecatory smile. "Calling it an African turkey was sort of a joke. Joke, you know. I mean about us wanting to buy pieces of your ostrich for Thanksgiving. Nobody ever et an ostrich. But an ostrich egg, now; why, that's another thing again. And what with the missis figurin' on Thanksgiving cakes and—"

"Joke?" Hop Wo's voice shrilled like a mouse's squeak. "You say no eat-um Af'can turkey—no eat-um ost-lich? Hah! No eat-um eagg neithah!"

"Come now, Hoppy, you ain't going to get sore over a little joke. How about five dollars for one egg? That's pretty high for one egg, but it's yours."

"No can," Hop Wo grunted and went into his wash-house.

That night Evangeline laid six more eggs in the egg-famished town of Silverbell.

JUST three days before Thanksgiving, and still the Cabeza Prieta river laid its embargo against the importation of such perishable freight as eggs. Not an egg cracked in all Silverbell lo, these nine days!

An interesting scene before the sheriff's office on Main Street—street crowded from curb to curb with the beauty and chivalry of Silverbell, armed for the most part with market baskets; Sheriff Bob on a platform with rows of great cream colored eggs in a hay box before him; Hop Wo with Evangeline by his side, both interested though detached spectators. Sheriff Bob points to one of the eggs:

"What'm I bid now for a prime ostrich egg, one of little Hoppy's best and only—little Hoppy here who gets the last laugh on all of us?

"Ten dollars? Well, that's a start. Remember the last egg went to Missis Justice of the Peace Teenty Skillet for sixteen-fifty—

"Twelve twenty-five! Going up! Thirty Thanksgiving cakes for twelve twenty-five—

"Thirteen-fifty from Doc Weathers. Serves you right, Doc; you were in on this African turkey joke with me. Now Hop Wo's got us all by the short hairs. All I get for this acutionin' is a promise of half an egg—

"Eighteen dollars! Eighteen from the Ladies' Neighborhood Club—

"Nineteen! Remember, folks, you can split up one egg among ten families. Nineteen more in Hoppy's sock. Nine—

"Twenty dollars! Twenty and sold!"

Everybody's

M*eeting* PLACE

Where it is suggested writers, readers and the editors gather for informal discussion

CAPTAIN DINGLE'S sea stories are so well known that it seems somewhat belated now to call attention to their color and veracity. We enjoyed reading the "Flying *Kestrel*" so much, however, that we cannot resist a word or two.

Here is a novel without a hero. For surely nobody could call Val Orson a hero. Far from it! But who can say that he is not a man? Captain Dingle has drawn a full-length portrait of him putting in all the shadows as well as the high lights and in doing so has created, or so it seems to us, a much truer picture than one usually gets.

As for the author, Captain Dingle went to sea at the age of fourteen—and he has never been far away from it since. He says too much brine in the blood is always a problem. Just when you think you are cured it bursts out like a lot of salt-water boils.

EVERYBODY'S is going to cultivate the writer who knows his ground. Take "Ridin' Through," by W. B. Corcoran. We wrote and asked him if he knew the West at first hand and we will let you judge from his answer whether he does or not. He writes just a shade indignantly:

> I have not crossed the Mississippi in ten years. Therefore, I made no attempt to portray the present-day West in "Ridin' Through." I have in mind the country as it was before 1907, when the fall of licensed gambling in Arizona marked a convenient point of demarcation between the old day and the new. Okalona is of course a fictitious town, as is Delta County. It would be in the country around Yuma.
>
> I was too young to know the old saloons and faro layouts at first hand, but I know the men who drank in them and laid their money on the turn of the card. On my first acquaintance with them I sat on their laps while they dangled their watches to my ear. But that is a minor point. I know the country in the sense that I have seen a dozen such towns as Okalona. I tackled nothing in the story I did not feel I knew. I did not try to tell a story of the roundup camps, for while I would vehemently deny complete ignorance of that scene, I can not honestly say that I ever participated in it. But I was in Yuma, and I did know Western men in their own country—I know them yet, outside it—and their vernacular and mental viewpoint seem no farther from my understanding than those of a New York taxi driver. I was one of the latter gentry for an interval, but for all that I do not feel definitely a taxi driver or even a New Yorker in type.

One of the pleasantest days in an editor's life is when a story drops out of the blue into his hands and he can be enthusiastic about it. Such a story is that vivid bit of Eastern intrigue, "Cholera at Bukit Batu," by L. G. Blochman. It fell out of the morning's mail in an envelope bearing a French postmark. The author very modestly puts his experience into the third person as follows:

> L. G. Blochman is a young newspaper man from California who has spent the last five years investigating exotic, if inferior, climates. He first visted the Orient while an undergraduate, as press agent for the University of California Glee Club. He later decided to do penance by returning in the more honest capacity of journalistic tramp. After working for a while with the Japan *Advertiser* in Tokyo, he was commissioned to make an industrial survey of South China, the East Indies, the Malay Peninsula and Siam for the Far Eastern *Review* of Shanghai. Faced with the necessity of eating during the year he decided to spend in India, he became staff photographer and feature writer for *The Englishman* in Calcutta. While chasing assignments from the

Himalayas to Cape Comorin, he was the guest of the Maharajah of Indore, before that prince developed trouble in his harem and was forced to abdicate. Blochman is at present editorial writer for the Paris *Times*, having previously served with other American editions in Europe. He spends the summer in Burgundy testing the vintage and writing short stories.

An author who, unlike Mr. Blochman, has little use for Paris is Robert Welles Ritchie who contributes to this issue that hilarious yarn, "Hop Wo's African Turkey." Mr. Ritchie has been everywhere but he has a decided prejudice for a certain section of our own country.

If I was born under any star at all, it must have been a restless comet; for it has been my predilection to be ever on the move. Strange as it seems to my friends, given the choice of a table at the Café de la Paix or a water-hole under a cliff in the Yuma desert, I'd pick the latter every time.

The Bund in Shanghai; Mexico City's Avenida Benito Juarez on a feast day; Miliner's Tickle on the Labrador coast with the aurora playing behind granite cliffs: each has its peculiar merits. But set me down under the purple and orange mountains which string across the Mojave wastes; let me prowl around among the dead old mining towns of the Mother Lode in the Sierras; instead of Parisian boulevard dandies, give me some old-timers with alkali dust on their necks for playmates. For me, more zest in a dish of Mexican *frijoles refritas* than in the Cheshire Cheese's famous beefsteak-kidney-and-lark pie.

Perhaps the Hop Wo of my story did not auction an ostrich to the citizens of Silver Bell; but I'll tell you what he actually did do. He sold a second-hand pair of automobile goggles to a Mexican to be used as reading glasses at night.

Another story that we believe you will find diverting is "Good to the Last Drop." Evidently the dialect for this story is authentic, for Harry Harrison Kroll has made a study of dialects. He writes us as follows:

I am professor of English in Lincoln Memorial University, out here in the very heart of the Cumberlands. I might confess that I'm sort of an authority on dialects, so Uncle Jesse Leverage talks an authentic tongue. Out from the college a few miles one may, if his legs are good and wind unlimited, reach the ridge tops and find the genuine vanishing American. The flivver, catalog-house literature, and modern highways, are swiftly finishing off the single frontier surviving in America. From where I sit writing I see car after car whizzing along the trail which in 1769 one D. Boone beat out through Cumberland Gap from the Carolinas into Kentucky. If his shade doesn't shimmy at the transformation in methods and speed of locomotion, it's because D. Boone's shade has withdrawn to the summits of nowhere searching for elbow room. Those of us that admire the primitive Anglo-Saxon stock, with their heritage of free thinking and speaking, rather lament the opening up of the wilderness. It's not so many years now before Appalachia will have become nationalized and subdued. When you come to visit me, you can actually make the whole blamed trip from New York to Uncle Jesse's cabin in high gear. All you have to do is rear back in your seat, step on the gas, and watch the filling stations whiz by. "Whar D. Boone killed a bar" you'll find a hot-dog joint, and at Indian Rock, just beyond the spot where he beat it over Cumberland Mountains, the pop-squirts' and gas-brigands' lairs would make a monkey out of the bears' dens that Dan raided.

Well, this completes our little talk about stories and authors this month. Now we'd like to hear from readers. Won't you write us?